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MY
LAUGHING
PHILOSOPHER

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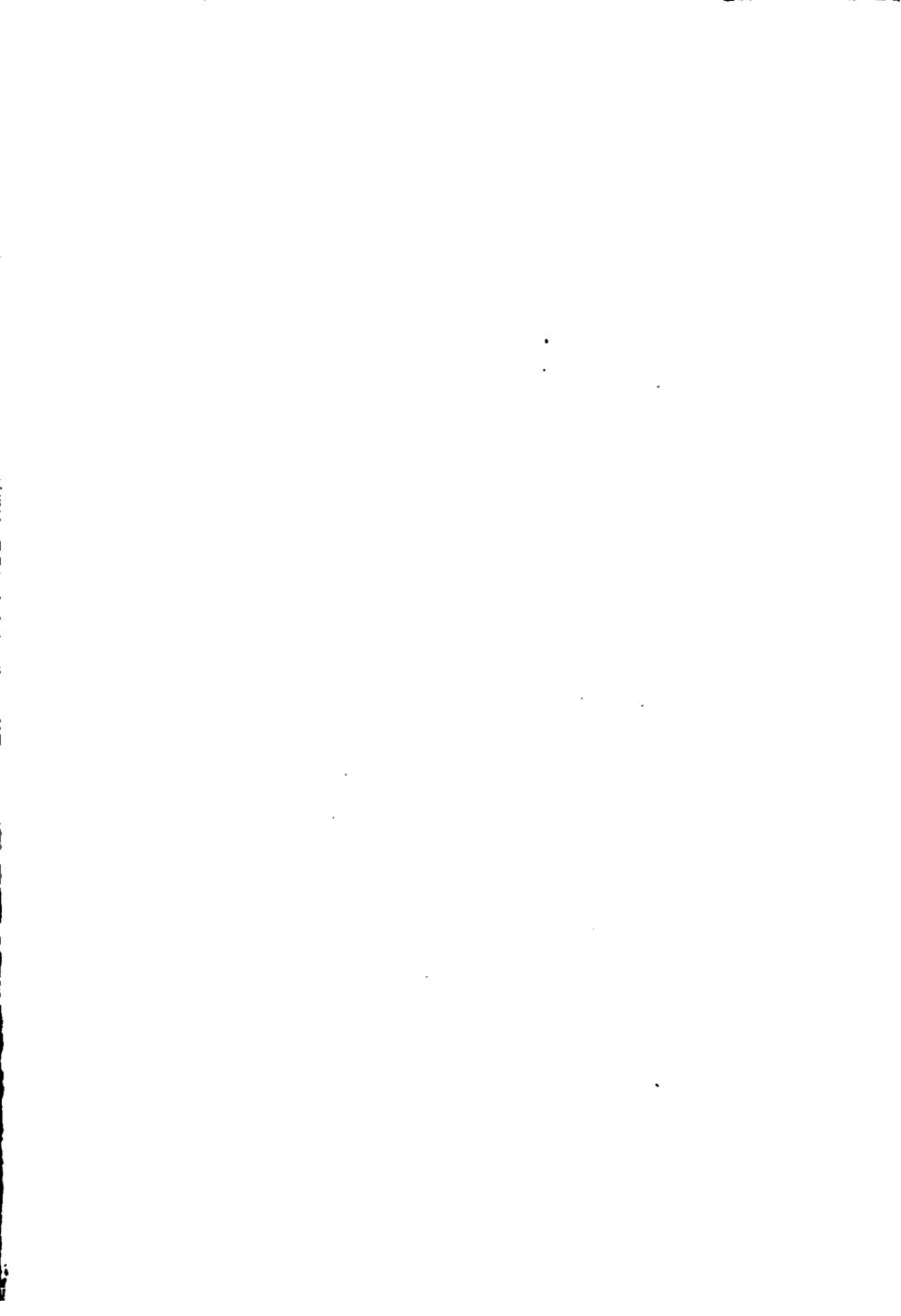
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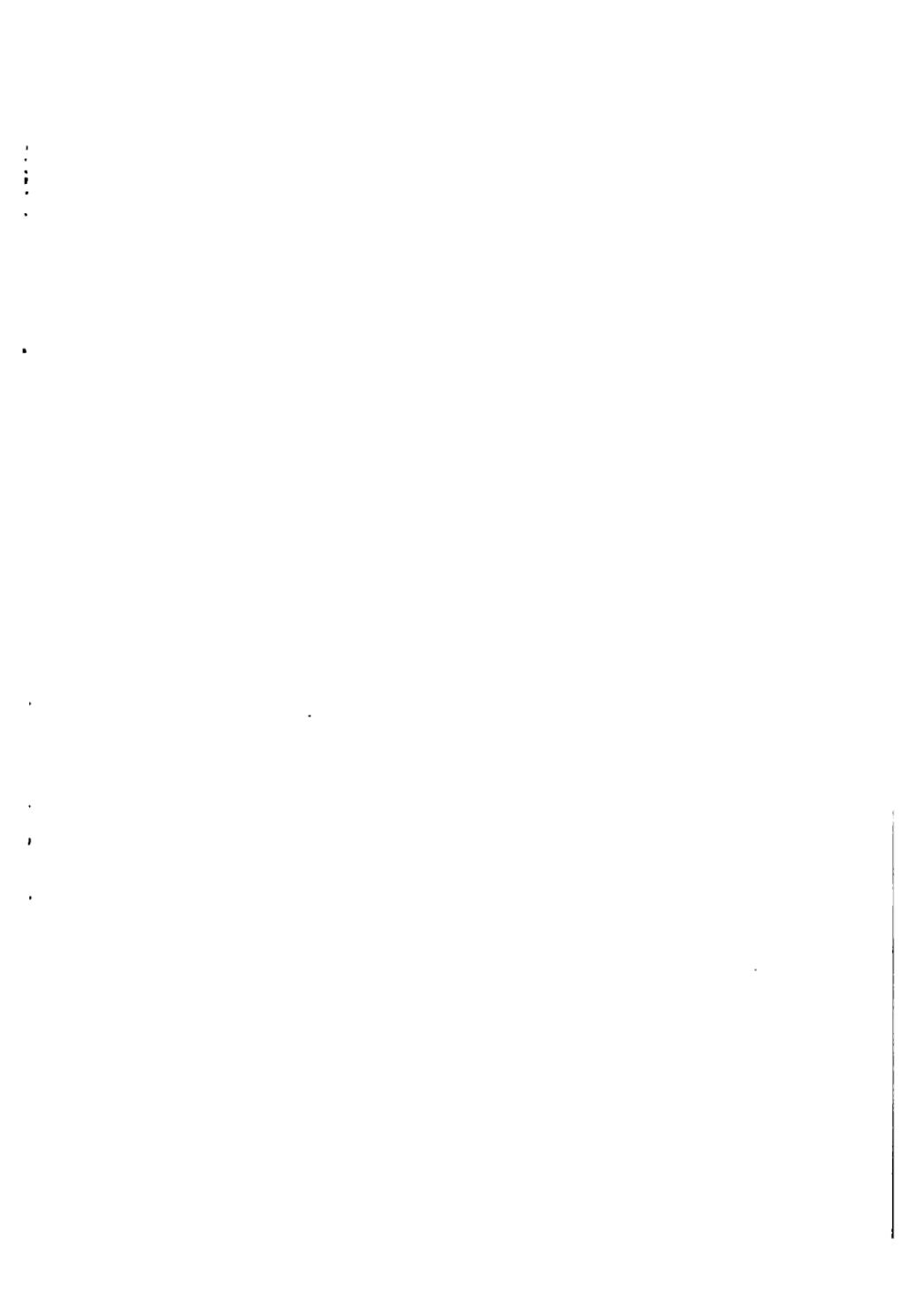
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MY LAUGHING PHILOSOPHER.







“A bit of magic from the morning of the world.”

1937

Philippines

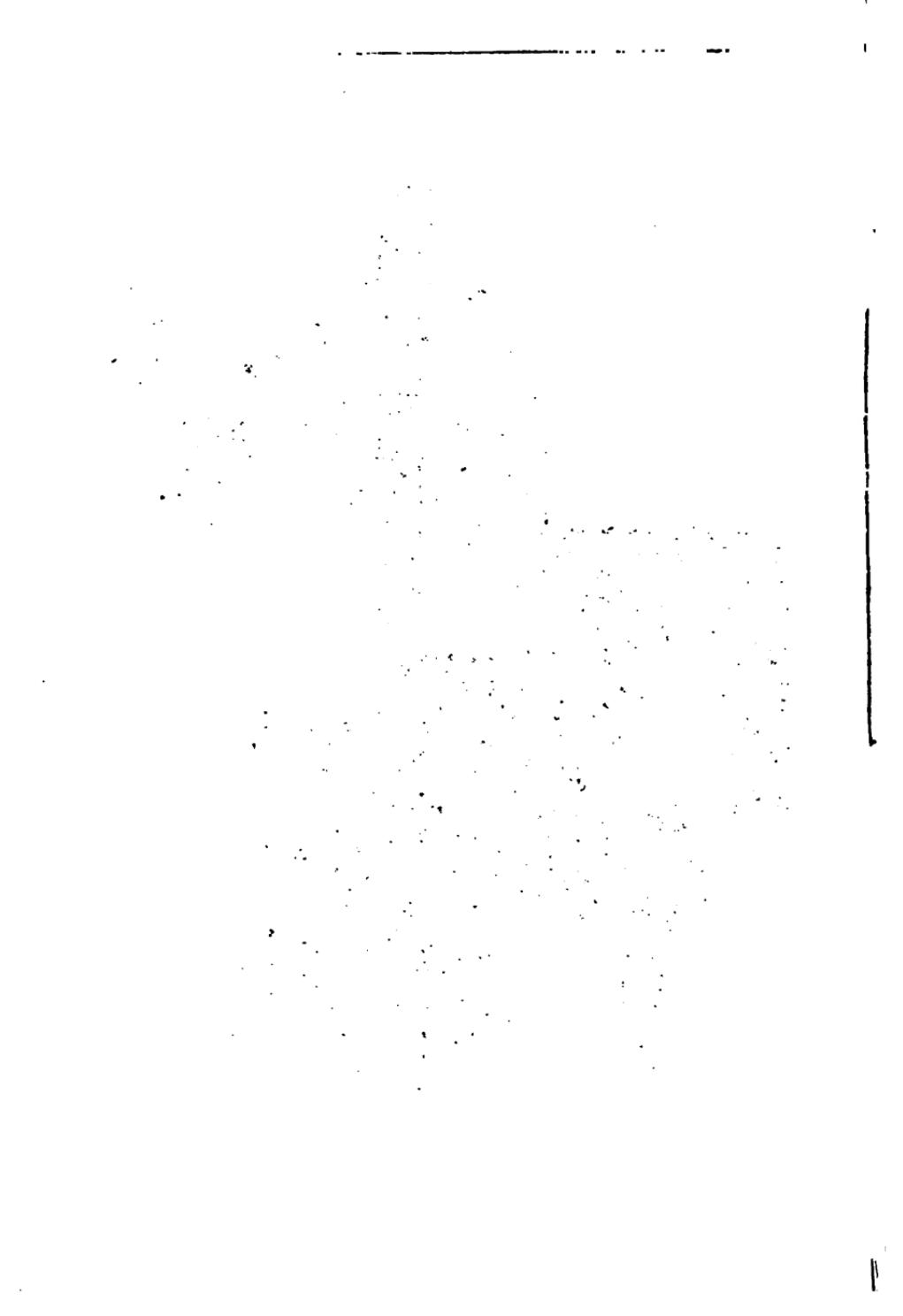
GENERAL INFORMATION

THE PHILIPPINES IS A COUNTRY LOCATED IN SOUTHEAST ASIA.

ILLUSTRATED BY CHARLES L. HARRIS

LOCATION

A. The Philippines is located in Southeast Asia.
B. It is located in the South China Sea.



My Laughing Philosopher.

BY

EDEN PHILLPOTTS,

AUTHOR OF "SOME EVERYDAY FOLKS," "DOWN DARTMOOR WAY,"
"FOLLY AND FRESH AIR," ETC.

ILLUSTRATED BY GEORGE HUTCHINSON.

LONDON:
A. D. INNES & CO.,
BEDFORD STREET.

1896.

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Ridout fund

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TO

JAMES NICOL DUNN.

JIND-HEARTED friend, I would not have thee take
This little book without a sign from me;
'Tis but the Thought it heralds that can make
A gift so small be offered worthily.
Then hold it as a messenger who brings
The very best within my power to send:
Wishes, that want no words to give them wings,
Kind-hearted friend!



CONTENTS.

CHAPTER I.

	PAGE
The Philosopher purchased for one guinea—In Wardour Street with Talbot—His presumption and folly—The connoisseur attempts to crush him—And fails—My bronze bust ...	1

CHAPTER II.

An age that seeks a sign—The wakening of the Laugher—He explains—Nothing left but laughter—A God's joke ...	8
---	---

CHAPTER III.

The clown of the solar circus—Nature no humorist—A grand joke forgotten—The riddle—A confession— <i>Wonders in heaven</i> —Inquiry touching the foul fiend ...	16
--	----

CHAPTER IV.

Introducing Montgomery and his system—His wife and son—His whisky—His palate for wine—His archangelic manner—His taste in tobacco—His lack of humour—His eye for a bronze—The bantam ...	25
--	----

CHAPTER V.

	PAGE
More of Montgomery—Dissolving views—The outrage at our place of worship—Providence intervenes—An explosion—Montgomery but slightly shattered—The sequel	35

CHAPTER VI.

Nonsense on a grand scale—I give my Laugher some serious advice—Celebrities— <i>Which?</i> ...	44
--	----

CHAPTER VII.

My tabby tom as a text—Advertisement—The wisdom of the Egyptians—Egypt, the cat's cradle of civilization—Did Egypt understand the cat?—‘Alfred Jingle’—The cats and the scarabs	53
---	----

CHAPTER VIII.

Singular experiment at a place of business—Fire insurance—A dialogue in blank verse—The Mummer, the Clerk and the Autocrat— <i>Crocuses</i>	64
---	----

CHAPTER IX.

My nocturnal ways—Dear old Poglad—His wife can still astonish him—He foretells signs and wonders—Miracles—The perambulator—The fiend Gossip—More surprises for Poglad ...	73
---	----

CHAPTER X.

Sparkes—His misery—“The wife”—Sparkes foretells a boy—He elaborates his sentiments—And fears horrible possibilities—His alarms happily unfounded	83
--	----

CONTENTS.

ix

CHAPTER XI.

	PAGE
A monologue from the Laugher—Memnon—Thebes of a hundred gates—The secret of repose—The awakening— <i>Hymn to the Sun</i> ...	93

CHAPTER XII.

Concerning buttons—Their significance in China— Regarded as substitutes for threepenny pieces —Adolphus Dexter—His button coinage—His rise and fall—Another button story ...	102
---	-----

CHAPTER XIII.

About rooks and their ways—Envy and malice in the rookery—Criticism—A Ruskin among rooks —And a tragedy—The childless hen—Ornitho- logical study in neurotics ...	112
--	-----

CHAPTER XIV.

William Fladgate—His experiment in philanthropy —A wise man from the East—And a wise woman—Ted Jones—Amelia Phoenix—Their enterprise ...	123
---	-----

CHAPTER XV.

Arthur Mawdle—An eccentric—His deplorable museum at Peckham Rye—The Laugher makes a quotation ...	135
---	-----

CHAPTER XVI.

The Laugher views Past Time—He has a serious fit upon him—And is rather impressive—Un- fortunately for himself, he reminds me of a little poem— <i>Jack-o'-Lantern</i> ...	144
---	-----

CONTENTS.

CHAPTER XVII.

PAGE	
Astrology and alchemy—Plato Green—He casts my horoscope—“Mars in the Seventh House”—“The Sun in the Sixth”—Afflicted by the Moon—I am proved a murderer—And promised madness—Apologies	153

CHAPTER XVIII.

A spring cleaning—Disaster befalls the Laugher—From the hand of the girl called Jane—Of domestic servants—My own experiment ...	164
---	-----

CHAPTER XIX.

Tom Bird— <i>A True Account of the Burglar and the Cuckoo Clock</i> —The little grey bird strikes three—Arthur Wright	176
---	-----

CHAPTER XX.

The inventor—Steel jaws and spring guns—A moral man-trap—Which is set by the larder-door—And catches a victim at the first time of asking	186
---	-----

CHAPTER XXI.

Concerning the amateur actor—Jasper Meredith—He explains his reading of “Hamlet”—His reasons for writing up the piece—And cutting it—His uncle’s views	197
--	-----

CHAPTER XXII.

By the sounding sea—Peters—He joins a shrimp-tea—Humours the young barbarians at play—And represents King Canute—He leaves the sea-side a reformed character	208
--	-----

CHAPTER XXIII.

	PAGE
Truth—The Laugher bursts forth into an allegory —He describes the rise and fall of a notable lie —But refuses to give it a name—The hair-splitter 219

CHAPTER XXIV.

At a music-hall—"Serio-comics"—The ballet—On dancing—The giant—The juggler—Acrobats—A comic song examined 231
---	-----------------

CHAPTER XXV.

Life on my garden wall—The tiger-spider and the daddy—Cold comfort—The grizzly-bear spider—I give a lecture— <i>A Fairy Song</i> 244
--	---------

CHAPTER XXVI.

Joseph Nathan—His methods—Baron Baumgertz and the cigarettes—Joseph errs—And meets his reward—The Laugher's comment ...	256
---	-----

CHAPTER XXVII.

A rhapsody from my Laugher 266
--------------------------------	---------

CHAPTER XXVIII.

Of amateur photographers—The camera fiend—Joe Gregory—His misfortunes—Photographed by an amateur— <i>Two Voices</i> 275
---	---------

CHAPTER XXIX.

Horatio Pugsley—His hatred of humanity—His views on sanity—And bodily health—His hair—His gout—His prophecy—His eternal part ...	284
--	-----

CHAPTER XXX.

	PAGE
More of Pugsley—The paragon of animals—Jellaby —He visits Brighton—Eastbourne—Seven Dials—Hanwell—Richmond—And Peckham Rye—He bursts on the aristocracy ...	294

CHAPTER XXXI.

The Professor's ambition—He gratifies it in Fiji— He emulates the child of Nature—Weakness of the flesh—A night scene—The footprint—The empty bottle	303
---	-----

CHAPTER XXXII.

Savages—They worship the Professor—Under a misapprehension—A delicate position—Cannibals—Saved by Australian mutton—The Professor decides to take breakfast on board ship	314
--	-----

CHAPTER XXXIII.

My Laugher plunges into space—And describes great matters of wonder—The Intelligence speaks—And criticises mundane matters unfavourably—I refuse to hear more ...	324
---	-----

CHAPTER XXXIV.

Last words from my Laugher—Tolerance—Faith and Reason—A simile—The Garden of God— A world-flower—“Fare thee well” ...	334
---	-----

MY LAUGHING PHILOSOPHER.

CHAPTER I.

The Philosopher purchased for one guinea—In Wardour Street with Talbot—His presumption and folly—The connoisseur attempts to crush him—And fails—My bronze bust.

“HUMOUR,” said my Laughing Philosopher, “is an attribute of God.”

I asked him whether the idea was original, and he answered that, so far as he knew, it might be; and that, at any rate, it was true. Then we argued upon the question. But before I record our conclusions, or the conversation which led my Philosopher to make the aforesaid remark, I shall tell you something concerning him. Frankly, I acquired him in Wardour Street for the paltry sum of one guinea. There never was any mystery about the matter, and my Laugher himself, with that fine philosophic spirit which characterizes so many of his utterances, has often told me that I made a bad bargain.

The circumstance of my visit to Wardour Street reminds me very forcibly of one Talbot; therefore he must be treated of forthwith, for it is my intention in this chronicle to meander where memory leads; and though Talbot looks but a poor figure to strut in the first chapter of any work, yet here he is, and here he will rest. On the day that I bought my Laughing Philosopher, Talbot was with me. He had just come into a large fortune, involving some thousands of pounds annually, and a park with deer in it, and an old country house. Talbot's small store of good sense suffered total eclipse in the hour of his unexpected prosperity. Ashamed to confess himself a "nobody," he built up a fantastic pedigree, unearthed all the Talbots he could find in English history, and claimed relationship with most of the best. The Herald's College had helped him in this deception, and ultimately, between them, they worked his ancestry back to the Conquest on one side, and to some Irish kings upon the other. He tried hard to get a little royal Scotch blood into himself, too; but one of the pursuivants — Bluemantle, Rouge Dragon, Portcullis, or some such authority—defeated this ambition. Then, having arranged his lineage, Talbot set about living up to it. His

old country house contained no heirlooms, and, as he truly observed, "It is idle to talk about ancestors at Hastings, if you've nothing to show for it but the blood in your veins." So he went to Wardour Street to buy the things which his ancestors wore at Hastings, and I accompanied him. You may possibly get a very fair idea of what the battle of Hastings must have been from the old arms and armour in Wardour Street. I remember Talbot took a fancy to one beautiful, bright, *cap-a-pie* suit, that looked as if it had been ingeniously manufactured out of sardine tins. Such, indeed, may have been its origin, for the dealer confessed that this suit was rather modern, and would ill become any of the Conqueror's party. I said—

"Of course you must be archæologically correct, or you will delude nobody worth deluding."

And Talbot admitted that my remark, if brutal, was practical enough. Ultimately he purchased several complete suits of armour, with dents and rust, and other indications of active service, all over them. He also bought halberds, and pikes, and battle-axes, and lances, and shields, and two-handed swords. I said—

"No wonder your people gave a good

account of themselves at Hastings, old chap."

And he was pleased, and declared that the different weapons and harness hung up on pieces of red plush would make the hall of his country house look very tidy.

Meantime, I had bargained for and bought my Laughing Philosopher. I look back to that mediæval muddle in Wardour Street, and contrast my solitary purchase from the dim past with Talbot's comparatively modern accoutrements of the battle-field. I review also the scenes which followed our expedition. My purchase has gladdened my heart these many days. Its magical properties have now become a part of my life; its weird voice is familiar to me; its originality of opinions refreshes my weariest hour. But Talbot's ancestors' fighting apparatus brought misery and shame with them, for Nemesis, in the shape of a withered archæological expert, swooped down upon his armour, and shattered each and all of my friend's transparent romances. Talbot was a fool to ask this man to see his things, but, puffed up by the price he had paid for them, he invited a connoisseur to spend an afternoon with him and feast his eyes on "the very pickings of the Middle Ages," as he put it, in his flamboyant way. I,

too, was of the party, but fortunately nobody else save Talbot's wife saw the subsequent exposure. We first came to a suit of armour, with the mud of Senlac still upon it.

"Now, that," said Talbot, playfully tapping the breastplate, "that harness was worn by old Hugh de Talbot at Hastings. A fine piece, professor?"

The expert sniffed, put up his glasses, and looked at gallant old Hugh's battle gear.

"Curious the good man should have put on that three-quarter suit of Elizabethan mail," he said. "And did he don this helmet, too? It's one of the sort called 'lobster-tailed,' and belongs to the time of Charles I. As to the two-handed sword, which appears to be tied round his middle with a bootlace, it was wrought in Germany hundreds and hundreds of years after the Conquest. He might just as well have carried a Remington to Hastings as that. On the whole, I should think your ancestor must have made rather a sensation when he took the field. Was he killed, or did he live to fight again?"

Of course sledge-hammer criticism of this sort knocked all the authenticity and local colour out of Talbot's heirlooms. Any sensitive man would have immediately sold the entire museum at a rubbish price to the village blacksmith,

but Talbot only hurried the professor away from his armorial hoards, and looked up the next train back to town for him. My friend afterwards explained that he held the expert to be a conceited, self-sufficient ass, who pretended to a vast amount of knowledge which he did not possess, and allowed his envy to interfere with his veracity. "In other words," said Talbot, "the man tried to cheapen my things because he had nothing approaching them in his own collection." Talbot, you see, is one of those delightful egotists bound in hide—satire-proof, wit-proof, anger-proof, truth-proof. He was a big man in his own estimation when he possessed but five hundred a year. Now that he has five thousand, his egotism obscures the noonday sun.

So much for him. It is time I returned to my Laughing Philosopher; but the memory of the visit to Wardour Street brought back Talbot so vividly that my own precious investment was for the moment forgotten. To be brief, he is a bronze bust standing thirteen inches high. I take him to be infinitely ancient—as old, perhaps, as Democritus—the Laughing Philosopher of all time. He may be even more ancient. My bronze bust has a battered nose and an expression so whimsical that to see him is to smile. His miraculous

gifts I discovered by accident. As the sweet, mystic lips of sun-kissed Memnon saluted Day, so, with a mouth comically grim, did my Laughing Philosopher make utterance under certain conditions; as the Hymn of Memnon floated unearthly to the listener in the dawn, so the singularly varied views of the Laugher smote upon my solitary ear during our midnight confabulations. But no golden tangle of light in the east could break his usual silence. Dumb, indeed, he ever was by daylight. The manner of our introduction—— No, candidly, it needs elaboration and a chapter to itself, if the reader and my Laughing Philosopher are to start fairly. A chapter, then, it shall have.

CHAPTER II.

An age that seeks a sign—The wakening of the Laugher
—He explains—Nothing left but laughter—A God's
joke.

I ANCHORED my bronze bust on a bracket in my study, and, for a week, he conducted himself as one might have prophesied. Then came the revelation. It happens that out of the many pipes of tobacco I permit myself every four-and-twenty hours, there is one to which I look more particularly for inspiration. Some comfort the brain, some soothe the stomach—each pipe, in fact, has an especial duty to perform; but one—the pipe smoked after midnight,—he is the King of Pipes, he inspires my soul. If he fails in this duty, I know my system is temporarily deranged, and straightway seek out some potent drug to re-adjust the lost balance. Once, after my Laugher had reigned in silence on his bracket for the space of seven days, I lighted the midnight pipe, and sought, amid the rings and

curls of Father Nicot's hair, which soon wound about me, for the idea I needed. At such times I occasionally talk aloud, to the detriment of my household sleeping overhead. To-night I chattered at some length. "This," said I, "of a truth, is a pampered literary generation, always seeking for a sign. And one might say that it had not far to seek, either, for signs and wonders quite fill just now the land of books. Those who read are sated with spice. People prefer their fiction, for instance, like their game—high. Novelty commands a better price than truth. 'Give me what I have never seen before, or heard of, or imagined,' say they. 'Shake a fresh permutation out of the old familiar figures; twist the kaleidoscope once again, and get a new combination out of the tinsel and broken glass and rubbish it contains. We are jaded, we are hungry and thirsty, and never filled. We are tired of the glorified dustbin in our novels, neither do we want theology, nor yet science, nor yet idealistic impossibilities. We are sick and weary of extremes and dogmas and schools. Find us something new, and we will bless you.'" I said all this aloud, and then blew a cloud of smoke into the face of my bronze bust. Instantly he sneezed, and before I had time to recover from my amazement, he had

replied to my previous remark. His voice was musical and low—not in the least like that of a human being, which is hardly surprising. As I first heard it, the thought occurred to me that some day, when they are improved, the language of phonographs may approach, though they can never equal, the weird, passionless utterance of my Laugher. He said—

“I take it that this tirade denotes a skull empty as a blown eggshell. You lack an original idea. It will not come. Therefore you sneer at the age which clamours for novelty at the doors of those who write.”

His head rose on his shoulders; his artistic droop vanished; there was a twitch in his thin lips, a gleam of something like light in his empty eyeballs—the thing lived.

I was too nettled with his caustic remark to go into the miracle of the entire matter until afterwards. If a chair, or a table, or even the fireirons had suddenly told me my skull was as empty as a blown eggshell, I should have answered back first, and investigated the phenomenon afterwards. So I said to my battered bust—

“It will be time enough for you to talk about what you don’t understand when I invite you to do so.”

" You did not know you had a listener," he answered.

Thereupon the superhuman nature of this circumstance was borne in upon me with sudden shock. I crept further off, grew uncomfortable, and made no reply.

" I am glad to wag my metal tongue again," said the Laugher. " I am your property for the next few years of time. So be it. You are pleased to regard me as an ornament. There is truly no disputing about tastes; but we differ there. A Roman gladiator, to whom I spoke plainly in the far past, dashed me upon the marble pavement of a bath. My nose felt the brunt of his indignation. I can never see myself in a mirror now without laughing. Time has dealt me other buffets—his weapon an angry man or woman in each case—but I hang together, and once in every five hundred years of mundane computation it is vouchsafed that I shall open my mouth and utter thoughts after the manner of men."

" I never heard of anything of the sort in the least authentic," I said. " Such magic is always traced to tubes, and tricks, and mechanism."

" Not so with me," he answered. " From Greece came I forth when she was young;

to Egypt I went when she was very old. My first master, who took me from the hand of the Greek that fashioned me, was a philosopher; but his wisdom tinkled like boy's prattle beside the wisdom of the Egyptians. Under the stone images of such as ruled the world's childhood, in a land of hieroglyph and obelisk and eternal sphinx, in the lap of a hoary civilization, dying with all its secrets, did I dwell. My magic is the magic of the first Pharaohs, whose dead knowledge no man shall ever learn again, whose mere playthings and graves are now the mysteries and wonders of the world."

"Don't make so much noise," I said, "or you'll wake my wife. I'll take your word for everything, but she would not; and she may think we are burglars."

"Always hesitate before interrupting your betters," he answered, and then continued—"For fifty nights I shall have speech with you, and you alone. Only the man whose property I am can hear my voice. We will converse, therefore, through certain nocturnal hours, for these fifty nights to come. Then my tale is told, and I am dumb for five hundred years more."

I looked up a dictionary of dates, and cross-examined him. Mine is a nature which will

not swallow absolute mystery of this kind without an effort.

"You last spoke, then, in the time of Richard II.?"

A smile instantly wrinkled the face of the Laugher.

"Possibly," he answered. "I never heard of him. Was he some British mannikin, more famous than the rest? For me, I came to this country but fifty or sixty years ago. I am a polyglot. The age and land that brings with it my short breathing hour, brings also its vehicle of speech and a knowledge of my new environment."

Then I began to realize the priceless significance of the concern which I had purchased. The possibilities in that bronze rapidly increased my respect for it.

"My dear sir," I said, "you ought to be a gold-mine to a man in my profession."

"No gold-mine I," said he, with great modesty. "Only a bit of magic from the morning of the world. Of course, one collects a little information in the course of many centuries. I have been upon this planet now so long, that there is nothing much left in it for me but laughter. You cannot understand that. I will explain my meaning on a future occasion. Your wife is knocking overhead.

She wants you to go to bed. She is right. It is time you did so."

"Never mind that," I answered, for the sound was not unfamiliar to me. "Elaborate your laughter. You, who have lived, or lingered, or existed so long, can still find matter for laughter?"

"There is nothing left but laughter for me," repeated the bust. "If a man could live and preserve his intelligence for a thousand years, the world would only make him laugh. Nothing could tear at his heart-strings then; the procession of humanity, fighting over its midget interests through its fleeting ephemeral life, has no element of personal sorrow left in it—only the comic."

"Such a man would be a brute or a demon," I declared; "and I venture to think you are talking, as you must naturally talk, like a thing without a human heart. That isn't your fault. No doubt you will teach me much worth knowing; and, in exchange, it is easily conceivable that you might learn of me also, if you are not too proud. Candidly I see nothing very admirable in a philosophy of eternal laughter. A joke's a joke; but the world, though it may have a comic side, is not a joke. And nobody should know that better than you."

Thereupon he made the startling assertion which begins the first chapter of this chronicle. "The world is a joke—a God's joke," said that bronze Laugher. "Humour is an attribute of God."

"I'll talk to you about it to-morrow night, then," I replied. "The noise overhead ceases. That is a bad sign. You have been in the world long enough to know 'tis most unphilosophic to come between a man and the partner of his life's journey. So good night."

He did not answer, and I turned out the gas, and left him.

CHAPTER III.

The clown of the solar circus—Nature no humorist—
—A grand joke forgotten—The riddle—A confession
—*Wonders in heaven*—Inquiry touching the foul fiend.

THE next night I moved my Laugher, and placed his bracket on the right-hand side of my armchair. Then, on the stroke of midnight, I lighted my pipe, and proceeded with our conversation as though no interval had broken it.

“What has God got to laugh at?” I said.
And the bronze answered immediately—

“At the gloriously comic spectacle of this particular atom of His universe. There may be funnier worlds than this—viewed from the outside—but I should say not many. Earth is the clown of the solar circus. God laughs at mankind, like the genial parent of all that He is, just as you laugh at your frolicking children, or as they laugh at the kitten playing. Believe me, nobody sees a jest quicker than the Everlasting; and it has pleased Him to

let this little earth-brood share the sense of humour."

"Nature is no humorist," said I.

"True. She is a methodical, law-abiding lady, with serious and purely practical ambitions. She is therefore herself an extremely comical spectacle at times. You men, alone of beasts, possess the power of intelligent laughter. It makes you all equal; it puts king and peasant on the same level; it takes you out of yourselves into a new sphere, into a new atmosphere. Honest laughter keeps the wide world sweet. God sends it to dry the baby's tears, to burst like sunshine over the little griefs of the child, to brighten man's few and evil days. The crow of the infant, the hearty laugh of the adult, the cracked chuckle of the aged—all are good and beautiful. As for you, if you would deserve well of your kind, preach a Gospel of Fun; show those who may read you that there is a comic kernel at the heart of all human concerns—that the very Music of the Spheres is laughter."

"I dispute your conclusions," I answered, "for they come from the head alone. That you cannot help, because you have not got any body. If you had been a full-sized statue instead of a mere bust, the Egyptian magician who has given you your voice and superhuman

existence might have added a heart. There can be no Gospel of Fun in a flesh-and-blood world like this. Humour may sometimes line our black clouds with a streak of silver, may soften the edges of a grief, may soothe a bed of suffering ; that is all."

"Far from it. The time is approaching when humour will play a weighty part in mankind's affairs. Men must be led in the way they should go. Then the whole world will laugh and grow fat."

"You can't teach people to know real fun when they see it," I said. "Men are often mere infants as far as humour is concerned. I will give you an example, if you want one. Why, last week a friend of mine actually took the train for a fifty-mile journey, and came over to see me, simply because he had heard what he considered was a grand joke. He wasted a day in order that he might have the satisfaction of asking me a most inferior riddle, and enjoy the pleasure of acquainting me with the answer when I had given it up. He burst in, saying that he had heard the finest conundrum brain of man ever conceived. He never inquired how I was, or how my family was ; he just sat down and began, 'Why is——?' Then he stopped and said, 'No, that's wrong. It goes like this : What

is the——?’ Then he became alarmed, then very depressed, and finally he exclaimed, ‘Hanged if I haven’t come fifty miles to ask you this riddle, and now I’ve forgotten it!’ I cheered him and consoled him, and said I doubted not that the enigma would return to him during luncheon. But he knew his memory better than I did, and was not hopeful. At intervals he asked, tentatively, ‘When is a——?’ ‘If you had to——?’ ‘What the——?’ ‘Why do we——?’ But he couldn’t get any further, and made a poor lunch in consequence.”

“The circumstance of his coming fifty miles with an indifferent jape, and then forgetting it, is not devoid of entertainment,” said my Laugher.

“Well, the fun of it was hardly obvious at the time,” I replied. “We smoked after luncheon, but he was paltry company, for he sat puffing wretchedly, without a word to throw at a dog, cudgelling his brains for the vanished puzzle. I carried on conversation, and tried to keep him up, and asked some riddles myself, but he made no sustained effort to solve them. I heard him, under his breath, muttering to himself, ‘What’s the difference between——?’ ‘Where was——?’ ‘If you had to choose——?’ ‘How do you

know that——?’ ‘When is a——?’ ‘Confusion take my memory!’ and so forth. Then, thinking to brighten the disappointed soul, I put to him a feeble problem I had recently heard at a whist party. ‘Why,’ said I, ‘can we be certain that Lady Macbeth had a pet dog?’ The question acted on my slow-witted friend like an electric shock. He jumped off his chair, hurled away his cigar, and said, ‘Confound it, old man, that’s too bad! Why, I came fifty miles, and put myself out awfully to give you a good laugh with that, and now you go and spring the thing on me!’ Thereupon I replied, ‘Well, dear chap, as you clean forgot the question, perhaps you fail to remember the answer, too. In that case, if I may suggest, you would be wise to take both problem and solution down in your pocket-book, as you seem to think the world of this riddle.’ He admitted, with bad grace, that he had entirely forgotten the answer; then I told it to him, and he made a note of it, and so went home, a crestfallen, completely nettled man. He never laughed once, mark you; he never even smiled from start to finish at the real joke.”

My Laugher made no answer. He had knit his brows, and was thinking hard.

“I heard some goodish enigmas in Egypt,”

he said; "but this of yours is modern, of course."

"Quite a modern, fatuous thing, I assure you," I answered; "but don't imagine it is mine. I should never have gone out of my way to invent it. I will wager that it is nothing like up to the quality of Egyptian riddles. I know they were splendid. But it is doubtful whether *Œdipus* would have guessed this thing, even though he had been familiar with Shakespeare. The answer is, 'Because on one occasion she was heard to remark, "Out, damned Spot!"' Spot is a name frequently applied to pet dogs. Do you see?"

"There appears not much standing-ground for a laugh in that," he said.

"None; which is the very point of the story. I was saying that a sense of humour cannot be put into a soul that lacks it."

"And that is where I differ from you. If you will listen and learn, I shall show to you how humour can be acquired—how the genuine thing might be taught in our schools. Train the young mind rightly, and your coming generation will be a race of laughers."

"It would be a noisy, rollicking world," I said and then, for the time being, the subject dropped suddenly, owing to an accident. I afterwards found that my nocturnal companion

liked to break off in his discussions abruptly, and start some new topic *apropos* of nothing which had gone before. On this occasion I had walked to my desk for a match, and, in seeking the box, I disturbed some papers, one of which dropped upon the floor.

"What is that?" asked the Laugher, noting my fallen manuscript with his eye.

It happened to be a rhyme. Here I may as well confess to you, as I did to him, that on rare occasions I adventure a modest verse, and burst forth into song. It does not pay me to do so, but I persist. I like to ramble modestly about the foot of the mountain I cannot climb. It brings rest after weary hours of prose. The jingle of a home-made verse is tonic to the tired ear of him who makes it; and so much may be done with a rhyming dictionary and a little alliteration. I try my humble experiments on authentic, established minor poets, and they show me all the mistakes, and talk beautifully and learnedly about spondee and dactyl, anapæst and molossus, pyrrhic and trochee, amphimacer and antibacchic, together with many such-like wildfowl. They ask me if I design a heroic, or an elegiac, or an iambic, and I tell them my dearest ambition is to produce something that shall combine all three. Occasionally they allege I have

produced hexameters or pentameters, and I feel proud to think what a man may do and never know it. More often they regrettfully explain my efforts are mere lyrics, and wholly defective at that. I certainly should never have asked the Laugher to hear any work of mine, or criticize it afterwards; but when I told him, in an apologetic sort of way, that the fallen paper was blotted with a little thing of my own, he said—

“Read it out. Never hesitate to recite your concerns to me. I may help you. Are you a poet?”

“Not so,” I answered hastily. “Your servant is a plain, prose-dealing man, as you see him. This poor conceit in his hand was fashioned for private amusement only. It represents an idle hour. But he will read it to you, nevertheless. He may mention, by the way, that his wife thinks well of it.”

“It is her duty to do so,” said the Laugher.

Then I read to him—

Wonders in Heaven.

I.

Where the great bow links mountain-top to plain,
Fringing with light some tempest's tattered cloak,
The Eternal's own sign-manual again
Gleams athwart heaven, writ high on flashing rain,
Full, round, and glorious, as though God spoke.

II.

And where hoarse thunders crack the silent night,
Growling of all that's black, and hid, and evil;
Where spurs and lurid jags of crooked light,
Snakelike and sudden, sear the startled sight,
Man reads the hurried scribbling of the devil.

There followed a rather awkward silence. The Laugher made no criticism, for he was concerned with higher matters than my rhyme. After about one minute's pause he asked a quite extraordinary question. He said—

“Who is this devil? They talked much about him in Rome a thousand years ago, but I never learned anything definite.”

“Your inquiry is too considerable to answer in a sentence,” I replied. “For that matter, I am not very confident that I can answer it. Opinions are much divided upon him. But the hour grows late; the fire has gone out; my pipe is the cold grave of a cremated joy. I will bid you good night, and endeavour to frame a reply to your question ere we meet again.”

CHAPTER IV.

Introducing Montgomery and his system—His wife and son—His whisky—His palate for wine—His archangelic manner—His taste in tobacco—His lack of humour—His eye for a bronze—The bantam.

JUST before the time at which my Laugher should have made utterance on the following evening, an acquaintance dropped in to talk. That literally was the object of his visit. His friends were all quiet, listening men—mere chipping-blocks for his conversation, mere excuses for the pleasure of hearing his own voice.

Montgomery was his name, and in his own estimation his system was more important than the sun's. His system included a wife, a boy at college, an appointment in the War Office, an eight-roomed house, with lawn-tennis ground, certain friends and foes, a pew in a place of worship, and a seat on the Local Board. Of course, he was the central fire round which all these satellites revolved.

It could hardly be considered an enormous system, or an unusual system, or a system calling for more than quite average human intelligence in its control; but Montgomery implicitly led those who enjoyed his friendship to believe that no man ever stood at the heart of a more complex, many-sided machine than that represented by his position in the world. All human affairs, somehow, seemed to hinge upon Montgomery—when he was discussing them. His deliveries on the Local Board practically solved every question of real importance affecting the body politic; his position at the War Office made him a sort of arbiter-general among the Great Powers; his pew interest in the religion of the day was the only thing that stood between the Church of England and Disestablishment. Moreover, principalities and powers knew Montgomery's significance. The gods fought over him. They showered down blessings and curses according to the view they personally took of Montgomery. Thus he was abundantly privileged in his home life. His astounding judgment had led him to the only positively ideal woman Nature ever produced—so he told everybody—and he had married her instantly, and she had presented him with a son, who now threatened to make a man

only second to his father. Montgomery's pictures were the best, his piano was the best, his furniture was the best, his carpets and curios, and lawn-tennis court and servants, were all the best in the wide world. He moved up and down, and saw what other men could do in the way of wives and families, *bric-à-brac*, household domestics, church sittings; but, in all candour, he never on any occasion met with a single system which, for united complexity and splendour, approached his own. Everything was superlative with Montgomery. The man's enemies—and he had more than one—were the basest, meanest, vilest, lowest, most unscrupulous fellows who ever breathed honest air. Words failed him sometimes to describe the intrigues and devilish conceits and fiendish machinations to which he had been subjected, both as a public and private man. But from each and all of his trials he had magnificently risen, with nothing but added glory.

This great and good soul it was who occasionally shed a passing hour of his sweetness on the desert air of my study. He lived at hand, and I always knew when he came to see me that it was in order to enjoy the rolling sound of his own uttered profundities. I will say, in passing, of Mrs. Montgomery, that

with years had come to her a genius for listening, which was little short of miraculous in a woman. She posed as a humble worshipper at her Sun's throne, and Heaven only knows to what heights of inebriated egotism Montgomery soared when alone with her.

He came in to see me with the suggestion of a hurried archangelic visitation, which is his peculiar charm. He sighed, sat down, and began to talk of his system. Presently he alluded, rather slightlying, to an important atom of my own. He said—

“That boy of yours is getting too fat. Obesity in childhood is a fault. Now, when my son was that age he was much thinner.”

“He’s very jolly,” I replied, “but a rare rascal.”

“Ah, most boys seem to be! My son, as you know, is very exceptional. I shouldn’t wonder if he was a ‘double first,’ or the next thing to it.”

“He has your brains, no doubt,” I replied; because you can butter Montgomery like a piece of bread. He is passive under the operation, and does not mind how thickly you lay it on.

He discussed his son for the next half-hour, and then drank some whisky. Having done so, he told me where I could get a much

better sort if I mentioned his name. The whisky he drank himself, at home, was no longer in the market. Lord Wiseacre had bought all that was left at a hint from Montgomery. His wines were also now beyond the power of the purse. He had one or two bottles of White Hermitage, which were worth a Jew's eye. Kings would willingly buy them of him. He was blessed with a marvellously delicate palate for wine himself. He had dined only recently with the Secretary of State for his Department, but the claret drunk on that occasion, though superb, merely served to distantly remind him of some he had in his own cellar. He always believed in getting the very best. Such was his judgment of a vintage that he never failed to do this. How did he like that cigar? Not bad at all—a shade dry, but very fair—as far as it went. He had an exceptional palate for a cigar. He told me where I could get a better brand than mine, if I mentioned his name. The cigars he smoked himself might have been grown in Paradise, from the way he talked of them. I asked him if they had come down from heaven in a balloon, or were mere earthly things to be secured for gold. He hates levity of this sort. He sat up and coughed and blinked, and said stiffly that there

were none in the market now. The crop was sold before it was picked. His share had been a paltry three thousand.

A minute or two later he looked at his watch, and said he must be going, as he wanted a long night's rest, and his brain quite clear on the following day. He was then to deal with a rather difficult drainage question which awaited the Local Board. There would be opposition, but he held the trump card. As he rose to go his eye noted my new purchase, and he picked up the Laugher off his bracket, and eyed him without admiration.

"What in the world's this?"

"A beautiful piece of old bronze I purchased recently in Wardour Street," I answered. "It is infinitely ancient. I was lucky to get it."

"My dear fellow, pardon me, but you should have taken an expert with you. I would have gone willingly. I have an eye for a bronze. You know that piece of mine—the satyr playing on pan-pipes? Now that *is* ancient. I wouldn't take a hundred guineas for it. This battered thing is worthless, and quite modern. It comes from Birmingham. They've swindled you badly, whatever you paid. If you follow my advice, you'll go back to the shop, and tell the people you've shown the

thing to me, and insist on getting your money back."

I took the bust from his hand, and returned it to its pedestal.

"I would not change it for ten thousand satyrs," I said. "It came from Greece when that country was yet young. You, with your enormous knowledge, should have discerned that it is no imitation."

"My dear fellow, good night," said Montgomery. "If you really stake a Wardour Street dealer against me, and believe him rather than one who may perhaps pretend to some general information—and who has an eye for a bronze—then there is, of course, nothing more to be said."

He departed, and I turned nervously to my Laugher. He was alive and smiling. He said—

"You are blessed in your friend, and it has been a joy to me to hear him. For that man the Almighty lighted the sun, and set the world spinning; for him the grape grows purple, and the corn golden; for him the Everlasting has invented Cosmos. And yet, as an integral portion of the Universe, why, one really might miss him altogether. Viewed as part of the eternal whole, he and his system go out like the spark of a dead

glow-worm. He vanishes, as a flea looked at through a telescope. There is nothing left of Montgomery but laughter."

"It's an overpowering manner he's got," I said, and continued to my Laugher, "I once saw a bantam cock down Devonshire way, in the dim grey dawn of a summer's morning, now far past. He looked round at the sleeping world, the sky above, the mists below, from beneath which murmured a river. Then his bright eye took in the silent farm-yard; he mounted a wheelbarrow, stretched his little neck, flapped his little wings, and crowed in a piping falsetto. 'Bless my life! How the whole wide world keeps quiet, straining its ears to catch my clarion notes!' he said. 'Yes, and here's the sun himself getting up over the hilltop to listen, too. I'll crow again. He shan't have his trouble for nothing.' So he crowed again with all his might, and Mother Nature rose, and the good sun kissed the dew out of her eyes, and scattered her misty night-robe, and adorned her in a glorious morning-gown of azure and gold. At sight of it birds sang and lambs frolicked, and bells jangled on the wild hillside, and long answering crows, all much louder than those of the bantam, saluted the morning from divers corners of the awakened homestead. The

bantam hopped down to his hens. ‘There now,’ he said, ‘blessed if I haven’t woke the whole world up. Now we’ll go to breakfast. D’you hear those cocks over the wall, trying to imitate ME! It would be annoying, if it wasn’t so unlike.’ And his little hens fussed about him, and told him that imitation was the sincerest form of flattery.”

My Laugher nodded. “So many of you mortals think you are going to waken the world before breakfast,” he said. “But that is the sun’s work. Now, the first axiom in my Gospel of Fun is that a man shall grasp his own individual insignificance.”

“Emerson remarks that ‘every man is wanted, but no man is wanted much.’”

“I never heard anything truer,” answered the Laugher. “You men are grand little creatures, but you really are little; and a little thing that thinks itself a big one must always be amongst the most comical sights this little world has to show. Make your kind realize that fact, and you will do them a service, and give them enough to laugh at all day long; because the world is quite full of little things which fancy themselves great. I take it that human life is troublesome, but too short to be very serious. The length happens to be determined for you, and a sense

of humour makes all the difference to the trouble. Examine this little, bustling, busy Montgomery you have shown me ; look at him seriously, with all his interests and opinions, and his ‘eye,’ and ‘taste,’ and ‘judgment,’ and ‘trump card’ in the matter of local sanitary arrangements. Regard him and his estimate of his place in the world, and then seriously ask yourself how the world would fare without him. What if he were suddenly blotted out ? ”

“ Why,” I answered, “ there would be fully half a column in the local newspaper, I should think, and the War Office people might or might not send a wreath of exotics.”

“ It is a great question whether they would,” said the Laugher. “ And what else ? ”

“ His wife’s tears, and a piece of white marble or red granite. That would be all.”

“ ‘That would be all,’ ” echoed the Laugher, and, retiring for the night, I left him chuckling on his perch in the dying glow of the fire.

CHAPTER V.

More of Montgomery—Dissolving views—The outrage at our place of worship—Providence intervenes—An explosion—Montgomery but slightly shattered—The sequel.

"I would know more of this Montgomery," said my Laugher on the following night, which was that of Sunday. "The man delights me."

"It happens," I answered, "that this very afternoon he has distinguished himself to the extent of nearly losing his life. The whole place is full of it. The story is not a short one, but you shall hear it, if you will."

"Proceed," he said.

"You are to know," I began, "that the vicar of this parish has recently returned from Chicago, bursting with ideas. He was not a broad-minded man when he went away. His parishioners, indeed, only prevailed upon him to go with the greatest difficulty. One might liken the operation to an owl being despatched

to pay the sunshine a visit. He went, however, as a lamb to the slaughter; and he returned like a roaring lion. America got hold of him, gripped his intelligence with iron hands, rent the sealed envelope in which his mind had been buried for thirty years, blew the dust of this London suburb from his eyes, sent him jolting and reeling out of the old grooves. The result was, that our amiable vicar, who had crept away to the Land of the Free, blinking, timid, unwilling, dubious, returned a new man. He did not absolutely wave the Stars and Stripes, or have his pulpit hung with them when he returned to it; he did not immediately indicate by word or deed that he had newly come from Chicago; but the poison was in him. It raged internally for the space of three weeks, during which time only the vicarage and your friend, Montgomery, knew the ravages of the malady, or were in the least prepared for the climax wrought by the distemper. Montgomery is the vicar's churchwarden, and many not only considered him mainly responsible for the vicar's visit to America, but are now holding him directly to blame for what has happened. We of the parish, however, knew nothing until last Sunday. Then there was a scene. Once only has the excitement and sensation

of it been equalled in our place of worship, and that was when old Mrs. Patterson, who is hard of hearing, misunderstood some banns which were being published, and, fancying she heard her own name mentioned, got up and forbade them.

"On the occasion I note, the vicar made a direct allusion to his recent jaunt. He touched briefly on certain innovations; he explained how the characteristic idea of American religion was cheerfulness, and so forth. Then he insisted upon the importance of making children's services attractive, and he concluded with this memorable thunderclap. He said, 'I purpose on and after Sunday next to deliver brief lectures about the Holy Land to all my young friends. It is further intended to—ahem—illustrate the discourses with—with *dissolving views*. Our northern aisle is admirably suited to the purpose, and, in brief, I shall throughout the coming winter be prepared to welcome all—the young especially, but their elders also—who will walk with me through the sacred scenes of Holy Writ.'

"Of course, people could hardly sit in their seats to hear the sermon after that. This, then, was the firstfruits of the vicar's visit to the World's Fair—a magic-lantern in the

north aisle. As Mr. Tapp, the people's church-warden, said, 'You may call it dissolving views, or what innocent-sounding word you like, but a magic-lantern is a magic-lantern, and a magic-lantern in church is an outrage.' Naturally, we were all concerned to learn Montgomery's opinion. He was about the only man any of us could indicate as being equal in obstinacy of purpose to the vicar himself. When, therefore, it was generally known that Montgomery had declared for the sacrilege, everybody felt that it would be carried through. Indeed, many of Montgomery's foes went so far as to say that it was doubtless Montgomery's own vile conception, that he had hatched this devilry unaided, and then made the vicar his cat's-paw. I cannot say as to that, but Montgomery maintained from the first that great Scriptural truths might be better conveyed to the young of our suburb through the medium of dissolving views in the north aisle than in any other fashion; and the vicar, thus supported by the strongest personality of all his congregation, went ahead at full speed. Many openly, and even in the market-place, feared that our good vicar had left his reason at the World's Fair. His mind, said they, was destroyed by the contemplation of American customs. Others

believed him to be perfectly sane, and set about writing letters to the local journal and the bishop of the diocese. Some, again, tried to move the vicar himself, but he was obstinate, and stuck to his determination. He had seen dissolving views work excellently well in America, and Montgomery was with him ; so he sent up to London for the apparatus, and dozens of views of biblical scenery, and a sheet. A few of our notable people resigned their ‘sittings,’ but the vicar was unmoved, and upon the completion of the catechism service, this very afternoon, he and Montgomery, having previously smuggled their horrid engines into the vestry by night, set to work in the north aisle, hung out the sheet, arranged the lantern behind it, and waited for the audience to come and sit down in front. A great number of grown-up people arrived half-an-hour before the proceedings began. In fact, so many adults crowded to the spot that there was little or no room for the young folks. Montgomery got the people nicely seated. I heard these things from my wife, who insisted upon going—for the sake of the children. The vicar’s daughters and their mother were said to look whiter than the sheet above them. They slunk in through a side door as though, poor souls, they had committed a

crime. Montgomery's gardener worked the slides. When all was ready, the vicar's churchwarden took the seat set aside for him by his wife and son. Montgomery, junior, I may tell you, is down from Cambridge for a few days. Montgomery, I say, took his seat, having first signalled to the vicar and the man at the lantern. Then there was a buzzing sound, and a big white moon appeared upon the sheet, with a splendid life-size silhouette of the vicar in the middle. Montgomery told him audibly to get to one side, which he did. After that a picture of Jerusalem was thrown upon the screen, and the lecture began. Everything went forward with the utmost decency and propriety until halfway through the address. Then, without a moment's warning, a beautiful representation of the Jordan changed into the portrayal of a spectacle violently and vulgarly secular. It suggested a man in bed, sound asleep, but there was nothing about him which chimed with the place, or the time, or the vicar's remarks. The vicar went on speaking for a moment. Then he realized what had happened, and stopped. At the same moment, in a silence which could be felt, the sleeping figure began to swallow mice. There could be no doubt about what was happening: a comic slide had

got in among the serious ones. The man at the lantern was turning a handle which produced a procession of mice, and the man in bed swallowed them as they came. I am told that Montgomery was a five-act tragedy in himself as he rose and hurried behind the sheet. The audience heard a scuffle, and then a tremendous explosion. The lime-light had gone off, or done something. It was a marvel and miracle that nobody was killed. Even Montgomery himself is said to be only slightly shattered. There will be no more dissolving views at our church. Of course, this place is full of the affair to-night."

I had got thus far when there came a knock at my front door. It was past midnight, and I marvelled who it could be. I went to the door myself, for my household had long since retired, and admitted no less a person than Montgomery, junior. He looked wild, and white, and wretched. He apologized humbly for calling at such an hour, but he knew I was rather late at night, as a rule, and he knew I respected his father, and he also doubted not but that I had heard of the disaster at church. He said—

"The governor's better. He's had some champagne, and dismissed our gardener. The doctor says it's only a shock to the system—

nothing broken or damaged. He rushed at the lantern, and tried to get the slide out, and the whole show carried away. I've come about the gardener. I want your advice."

"It's no business of mine," I told him.

"I'll make a clean breast of it," he continued. "I did it to score off the governor. I only meant an awfully innocent little joke, you know. I gave the slide to our gardener, and told him to introduce it about half-way through. The gardener's known me ever since I was a child. He'd do anything for me. And now my governor won't believe the slide got in by accident, and he's sacked John. The question is, what ought I to do?"

"No question at all. You can't let the man suffer for you."

"I don't care about myself, but it'll be such a jar for the governor. He thinks I'm a sort of young angel without wings. Candidly, I believe it will kill him if he hears I did it."

"You ought to have thought of that before," I answered. "Of course, justice must be done. If you cannot face him, go back to Cambridge to-morrow, and write to your parent, and explain everything. It will be a blow for him, but I hardly fancy he is the man to die about it."

"All right," he said, "I will. I'm awfully obliged, I'm sure."

We talked a little longer, then he departed, and I returned to the Laugher.

"That's the sequel of my narrative," I remarked.

"It is very sufficing," he replied. "Montgomery the elder will have much to think about presently. It will try him severely to find that, after all, he has only produced an ordinary young scamp of a son; but he will throw all the blame of him upon his wife."

CHAPTER VI.

Nonsense on a grand scale—I give my Laugher some serious advice—Celebrities—*Which?*

UPON the following evening I had intended to ask my Laugher to utter some reminiscences from early Greece, for I fancied he might supply me with not a few novel plots, and their accompaniment of local colour. But he began to talk before my last pipe was well lighted. He said—

“ You must listen awhile longer to my theory of humour.”

I had no great wish to do so, because, in my own opinion, this bodiless, heartless Laugher could by no possibility arrive at any conclusions calculated to benefit humanity. He had no power to love or hate ; he could not feel joy or sorrow ; he was, therefore, incapacitated by the nature of his peculiar existence from providing valuable information upon this subject. But I felt bound to hear him.

“ We must properly value the force of incongruity,” he began. “ Nature, as you

remarked not long since, is no humorist ; but in that fact lies half the comicality of the world. She is an eternal foil to this wondrous human race which she produces. The achievements of man, lying as they do throughout the length and breadth of Nature's great theatre, are infinitely laughable."

"I don't see that," I said.

"Yes, you do," he answered, "only you are not accustomed to push the inconsistency far enough to be grandly amusing. For instance, many people would laugh if they saw a wedding-ring on the finger of an ape, or dress-shoes upon a tiger's toes. They would be entertained by the incongruity of the human contrivance, as contrasted with a fragment of savage nature. That is the crude idea. Now, take instances where the disparity is more subtle. If you saw an old boot lying on the Sahara, or an empty matchbox floating upon the Atlantic Ocean, your sense of humour is such that you would smile. The apparition of man's little contrivances alone in the majestic lap of Nature would amuse you. But note that no fragment of Nature's own handiwork can amuse. A leaf, a shell, a bird, a beast straight from Nature's workshop, has in it nothing to raise mirth."

"I'm not sure," I said. "Take a mouse,

and put him—say on a bishop's throne in a cathedral. He becomes ridiculous then."

"Not in the least," answered my Laugher. "His position is ridiculous by reason of the train of ideas it sets moving, but he is not. In the same way, a bishop would be ridiculous sitting on the sun's throne in heaven. Man and his works, when sharply contrasted with Nature, become extremely ridiculous. But the laugh is on Nature's side."

"We are her children," I remarked. "Why should she laugh at us?"

"She does not," he answered. "She never laughs in spring, summer, autumn, or winter. For that matter, you, her latest born, give her more to cry for than laugh at. You spend your lives tearing her to pieces. She is your mother; you are matricides, you men, every one of you."

I ventured to hint that he was wandering.

"Not so," he answered. "I am approaching my point, which is, that every human contrivance and every human being is laughable against Nature's background. Conscious intelligence, at the point it has now reached in this planet, is only sublime viewed from a human point of view. Your institutions, your works, your conceits, your organizations, your nations, your schemes of existence, your

profoundest philosophy, your mental and physical achievements, your inventions, your discoveries—all that you have done since the Everlasting bred you—is but a panorama of glorious absurdity, with Nature for the background. You laugh at a pair of baby's socks on the top of a great mountain, but you stare at me for laughing at the Theban Sphinx in a great desert; you laugh at small boys playing soldiers, but you stare at me for laughing at men who do the same; you laugh at the rim of an old straw hat in mid-ocean, but you stare at me for laughing at a man-of-war."

He paused a moment, and I felt it was time to check him.

"Pardon me, but you are now talking nonsense on a grand scale," I said, "and we had better change the subject, because you address a mere human being, with human interests, and a high opinion of human nature. You are ahead of the time. Your theory of humour is probably practicable for a mere abstract intelligence imprisoned in a bit of ancient bronze by unearthly magic, but it is not a promising instrument for the human hand or brain. Men do not want to picture themselves a mere race of busy Tom-fools, striving and sweating, and doing their little best for God Almighty to look on and laugh at. And it would take

more than you or I can do to convince them it is so. We will leave this cold subject, and get back to something warmer, if you please. Temperature's nothing to you, of course. You would smile on if the sun went out; but mankind would perish. We want light, and try to find it; but we need warmth, and die without it. No man starving of cold ever enjoyed the best joke in the world. Your mental attitude doesn't freeze me, because I've a sneaking admiration for big views, but it would freeze many people. You'll forgive my plain speaking, I know."

The Laugher merely smiled. "I wanted to see how far you would permit me to go," he said. "I have been flung down head-first for saying less. A man I knew in Rome a thousand years ago, lost his life because he publicly echoed a remark I made to him in private. I, of course, was not suspected at the time, or I should have been destroyed."

"There are many who would destroy you to-morrow, and think they did Heaven a service," I asserted. "It seems absurd to tell a personage without any feet not to tread on people's corns, but the warning is seriously meant. You mustn't talk in this big way. Five hundred years hence you will possibly find yourself more in accord with general opinion,

but just now you are not merely ‘up to date,’ as the vulgar phrase goes, but far ‘beyond date.’ Man’s estimate of man is absurdly high just at this moment. He is not going to hear himself run down by an ancient bronze.”

“How many are living to-day whom those I may speak with five hundred years hence will describe as great?” asked the Laugher.

“We are badly off just now for adult genius,” I admitted. “The world was never fuller of celebrities, whose little lives and little fame will all be ‘rounded with a sleep’ in a handful of years; but there are no great men, if we except, perhaps, two or three. Earth, however, seems ripe for a new prophet. There may be now at his mother’s breast a babe whose name will echo through the centuries, and be hallowed on the lips of him who hears you speak in the year 239——”

“But some live who are born great,” he said, with a twinkle in his eye.

“No,” I answered; “you will not catch me with that phrase. A man may inherit power, not greatness. Men are not born great; they are born babies.”

I approached my desk at this moment, and the action was fortunately sufficient to change the subject. My Laugher watched me hunting for a thing I could not find, and presently said—

"Do you know that your wife's domestics habitually come into this room in the early morning, before you break your fast?"

"I know it, to my cost," I replied. "They come here to 'tidy' and to 'dust.' The result of tidying and dusting my desk is not to be set down in words. At this moment I am searching for a manuscript which I placed very carefully under a paper-weight last night."

"Exactly. The girl they call Jane is responsible. She moved the paper-weight, and your manuscript chancing to fall behind your desk, she left it there in peace."

I hunted where the Laugher directed, and discovered my lost work at once.

"What is it?" he asked. "As I have been the means of returning it to you, I think the least you can do is to read it aloud. Nothing poetical, I hope?"

"Nothing in the least," I said. "There are rhymes here and there in it, but no poetry. It is a modern tragedy told in rondolets—at least, my honest impression is that they are rondolets, but I may be quite mistaken."

"What, then, is it about?"

"A man in love. The machinery of the concern is rather elaborate. You are to imagine, if you please, a young fellow torn in half by conflicting emotions—between desires

to marry a rich old aunt, and her poor, but beautiful, niece. He cannot have both, of course, but he is quite certain in his own mind that he might have either for the asking. At this juncture I have recourse to the supernatural. I set my young man between two beings from another world. On his right stands a winged angel—a bright, glorious thing; on his left we note a grim and dusky demon. These personages, according to their respective judgments, plead with the young man. Each weighs with him; he attaches certain importance to the counsel of both. Then the concern proceeds to relate that young man's actions, and the conclusion which crowns them. All these varied matters I have achieved in the space of five verses."

"Don't talk any more about the thing, but read it aloud," said my Laugher. Thus admonished, I gave him the complete effort. It ran thus—

WHICH?

I.

He should wed.

There are certainly two whom he might.

He should wed.

'Tis a problem for heart or for head.

Gold is lasting, but love is so bright:

Then for which of the twain is it right

He should wed?

II.

‘Marry gold !’

Growls a demon ; ‘if marry you must,
Marry gold.
Choose the aunt ; she is ugly, but old,
And a tomb will soon swallow her dust.
Love for you means half-share in a crust :
Marry gold.’

III.

‘Take the niece,’
Pleads an angel. ‘Shun sorrow and strife.
Take the niece.
She will bring with her blessings and peace ;
She will be the dear joy of your life.
If you’re wanting a pearl of a wife,
Take the niece.’

IV.

He tried each—

First the aunt, with the nicee in reserve.
He tried each.
Old and young seemed alike within reach.
As the man was not lacking in nerve,
And considered that either would serve.
He tried each.

V.

He lost both.

‘Twas unseemly and rather absurd.
He lost both.
When the aunt said him nay, nothing loth,
He proposed to the niece ; but she’d heard
Through the keyhole ; and so, in a word,
He lost both.

CHAPTER VII.

My tabby tom as a text—Advertisement—The wisdom of the Egyptians—Egypt, the cat's cradle of civilization—Did Egypt understand the cat?—‘Alfred Jingle’—The cats and the scarabs.

UPON the following evening it chanced that my cat, for once having no engagement elsewhere, was sitting up with me in my study; and this unimportant circumstance deflected conversation into a new channel. As twelve o'clock struck, and I lighted a last pipe, my Laugher spoke, and took the tabby tom below him for his text.

“It is an interesting fact,” he said, “that you unstable human beings have now ceased to show any reverence, or even respect, to brute creation.”

“Even if that fact is as you say,” I answered, “there may be a reason for it.”

“There is a reason for everything,” he replied; “and in this case the reason appears sufficiently plain. You have, through your

wise men, proved to yourselves that evolution is a natural law ; you have therefore established a relationship more or less close between yourselves and the beasts of the field. Finding that they are but cousins so many times removed, your respect for them naturally ceases. Now, the ancients were wiser than you. To them the human idiot and the unconscious animal alike manifested the Supreme ; to them the word of the madman might hide an oracle, the action of the beast conceal a prophecy. I happen to know that there are great truths beneath these superstitious imaginings. Take that cat ; he is a mere unconsidered trifle in your house. Does it occur to you that even he might teach you more than every book in your library ? ”

“ I doubt it , ” I said. “ I ’ve got all that he could teach me in the original French. My familiarity with that cat is such that I do not hesitate to say he has forgotten more wickedness than I ever knew in my wildest days . ”

“ Reflect , ” said the Laugher, seriously. “ Are you wiser than the ancient Egyptians —they who built the Great Pyramid—that mighty monument, to which the pole-star himself was a new-comer ? ”

“ Yes , ” I said, “ I am. You, and many

other people beside you, are always harping on the Pyramids. What of them? They are monuments of fruitless labour—grim and awful to see. They are graves, not only of the Pharaohs, but of generations of wasted human energies; they are a problem for Time. But he will solve it; he will powder them level with the desert yet. True, it has taken him some few thousand years to fret the apex of your Great Pyramid. Probably even you will not exist to see the final blow struck, if he goes forward at the same leisurely rate. But he will win; he will nibble and gnaw that giant to the dust before he has done with it. And who honestly respects those Pharaohs now? Why, to love a big, showy grave is merely commonplace. If a man could arrange for a cenotaph on the sun to-morrow, people would only consider it vulgar. That sort of thing is called ‘advertisement’ to-day. To leave directions for advertisement after death is to rob your heirs. Give me a green grave in the heart of the country, and a violet watered with tears. I don’t want a pyramid, or even a sarcophagus, or even a slate slab.”

“When you have done, I will proceed,” said the Laugher. “You answered my question; that is all I required from you. You hold yourself wiser than the Egyptians. Had

you not better reconsider that? If you persist, I shall——”

“Let me explain,” I said, interrupting him. “I mean in a certain sense. Egypt was a sort of ‘Home of Magic and Mystery,’ like our Egyptian Hall on a big scale. Backed with the wisdom of the centuries, of course, I——”

Then the cat arose and stretched himself, and apparently recollected an appointment after all, and directed me to let him out. This enabled me to drop the question of whether I was wiser than the Egyptians, and branch off on a side issue.

“There is not the slightest doubt that cats had a splendid time in those days,” I remarked. “On the whole, it must have been better to be born a kitten than an ordinary baby. You may almost call Egypt the cat’s cradle of civilization. The reverence attached to these beasts always puzzled me. Either feline nature has entirely changed since then, or else the priests of Osiris and Pthah and Amun could not read character properly.”

The Laugher smiled upon me with pity.

“Is it not possible that Egypt understood the cat, and you do not?” he asked.

“I don’t pretend to understand them,” I said; “I only see what the average cat is too

cynical to hide. Take my cat. He is called 'Alfred Jingle,' because he came here as a mere needy, but fascinating, adventurer, with nothing to commend him but his effrontery and racy manners. Well, he is a cat wrapped up in self—a handsome, dissipated, libertine of a cat, who uses this house as a mere centre for recuperation and refreshment. Doubtless he gives it as his address when he designs hospitality. He is among us, but not of us; he never concerns himself with our interests, excepting at meals, and he resents any investigation of his own affairs—not that I, for one, should care to peep into his private life. He is here ostensibly to keep down mice. He has only killed one mouse in three years, and that was a domestic pet white mouse belonging to my son. What I say is, that he always plays for his own hand. Last summer he struck up a violent friendship with a black cat next door. He brought her in to lunch four days running, through the dining-room window; and when I objected, on the last day, and wouldn't give either of them a third helping of cold mutton, our cat did everything but speak—led the other off again out of the window, and took her to the dust-bin, and regaled her there. The dust-bins in this row of buildings are a sort of feline

restaurants, I must tell you ; and my cat has long since acquired an absolute mastery of the different bills of fare. He knows where the light and nourishing may be counted upon ; he is aware that when game is in season sundry receptacles will not be visited in vain. Cold meat is a certainty somewhere down below us ; and, on the other side of the road, salt fish occurs as regularly as Friday. These are a few of the things my cat knows and does. And yet you allege he could teach me more than any book in my library."

" You have gathered a little of him ; you have seen enough to know there is more behind. He has given you a faint hint of his inner nature, that is all. Now, I studied cats in Egypt. The mystic who possessed me, and inspired me, kept many sacred cats and kittens of all colours, and a little maiden to look after them, and see to their refreshments and various needs."

Suddenly my Laugher broke off to chuckle, which he did very heartily.

" What is the joke ? " I asked.

" I am happily reminded of an incident illustrating the deeper powers of the feline race, their methods of communicating ideas, their amazing readiness to seize any opportunity and turn it to advantage. You know

the Scarabæus—the sacred beetle? My priest-master had those, of course. They came in for greater respect than anything, but on one occasion a sacred cat ate a sacred beetle, shell and all, and was none the worse. You will see in an instant what a philosophic problem this gave rise to. The priests separated the cat from all its kind, and argued about the matter for days, and abandoned all their regular duties until a conclusion was arrived at. The reigning Pharaoh, who had a pretty talent for hair-splitting, at last solved the difficulty. He admitted that to kill a Scarabæus was a crime, and to eat it afterwards a frank abomination; but he pointed out that it was well known that a cat could no more commit a crime than a Pharaoh, and therefore, in this case, the annihilation of the sacred Scarab must merely be deemed a circumstance, and not a sin. He decided that by virtue of its holy meal, a double portion of sanctity must be portioned out to that cat, and, in fact, a double portion of everything. The cat, he decreed, must be exalted over all its fellows, must be made much of, must receive a special title, and enjoy every advantage which it was possible for the heart of man to conceive, or cat to desire. After death he arranged that it should be specially

embalmed by the royal embalmers, and be buried in a separate catacomb all to itself. Now follows my extraordinary illustration of the sagacity of the sacred Egyptian cat. The thing which Pharaoh had ordered leaked out in feline religious circles, and from that time forwards the poor Scarabs simply called unto the hills to cover them. No genus of beetles, sacred or otherwise, ever passed through a more deplorable experience. The cats killed and ate. One big, yellow-eyed animal—black with a white patch on his chest—had an iron constitution, and felt ambitious to be the most sacred tom-cat in Egypt. With this intent he devoured four consecutive Scarabæus beetles, and was just getting elated about it when his digestive organs gave out, and he passed away in great discomfort. After this thing came to Pharaoh's ears, the monarch changed his mind, and said that some evil spirit was upon that generation of cats, and directed that every animal over three months old should be destroyed, and not embalmed afterwards. So all their ingenuity was wasted. That is a true story, for I saw it myself somewhere about 600 B.C."

"No doubt it's true," I answered. "It has a ring of truth about it; but it proves nothing, excepting that a parcel of cunning

sacred cats once overreached themselves in Egypt. If you want an example of real sagacity almost approaching reason, I can tell you about a dog that——”

“Do men still tell dog-stories?” he exclaimed; and then continued, “Don’t tonight. The hour grows late. Let us change the subject, or the evening will be quite wasted.”

“Well,” I answered, “speak. Discourse to the point. I want good material. You must have a fund of recollections and reminiscences. Look at your past! You have enough experience to rule the world, if you were a full-sized statue. Tell me something terrific. You, as a silent spectator, must have stood in the shadow of some grand tragedies, and gathered the clues to much mystery and human suffering.”

“I have seen strange things truly; but the world is simply a revolving panorama, and the strange things cease to be strange after many repetitions. Nothing that I could say would strike you as particularly novel. There are three fountains of the dramatic in man’s life. The first and greatest lies in the struggle of the human brute’s nature against the controlling intelligence man possesses; the second appears in the human ambition for

power; the third will be found in the eternal action of chance and heredity. These complex forces——”

He stopped suddenly, and looking up at him, I found that his hour was past for that night. He had run down like a clock. The life was gone from his eye; his head was drooping forward. My Laughing Philosopher, in fact, only enjoyed the power of speech between midnight and one o'clock in the morning; but, though dumb by day, he possessed certain weird intelligence, and always knew what was going on about him. This fact bred some disquiet in me, and threatened difficulties. I spent much time in my study, and so did my wife and others. Knowing that the Laugher could comprehend all we said, I naturally endeavoured to raise the level of our domestic chatter a little, and discuss matters more likely to interest him than the everyday gossip of a small household. My wife, who knows me sufficiently well, speedily discovered my changed methods of conversation, and rebuked me—unfortunately, before the bronze. She said, after I had made some more or less happy reflection on the modern literature of emotion—

“I wish you would keep all that for your books and things. You've developed an

inclination lately to try ideas on me, and talk like print. The effort is transparent, and painful to see. Don't, there's a dear. Be natural in the bosom of your family, at any rate."

Whereupon I pretended to misunderstand her meaning, and affected an annoyance which, in reality, I did not feel.

CHAPTER VIII.

Singular experiment at a place of business—Fire insurance—A dialogue in blank verse—The Mummer, the Clerk and the Autocrat—*Crocuses*.

"YOUR wife was quite right this morning during breakfast," said the Laugher to me on the next occasion of our converse. "She was right when she told you not to try and talk like fragments out of your books. The art of conversation is dead, and will never be revived like that. She told you to be natural. It appeared to annoy you at the time, but it was good advice, because, in the present day, it is no longer natural to study sentences, to turn phrases, to polish the spoken word generally. The fact is to be regretted. Conversation now appears to be little more than short, sharp assertion and retort, question and answer, all unfinished, ineloquent, unattractive. Even repartee is mere rudeness now; while if men try to give their utterances a literary smack, as you did, the thing is noticed

instantly, and the offender set down as a pedant, or a conceited idiot."

I told him that the effort had been made simply out of respect to him. I then continued—

" You remind me of a past incident. Once, by way of education, I essayed to speak in poetry. I was officially engaged at the time, and a fellow clerk and I resolved to conduct our operations in nothing but Shakesperean blank verse. Fire insurance was the nature of our occupation, and I suppose that never before or since has the terminology of that business been turned to better account. I may tell you that the technicalities of fire insurance are admirably suited to blank verse. We fell into the habit with ease, and at last determined to try it upon the public, when they came in to insure their houses and goods, or to renew premiums on property already insured. One day an actor entered. There was no mistaking him. He was one of the good old stock-company, ten-parts-a-week, 'make-up'-off-the-wall sort—not your modern cuff-shooting boy, who gets quite handsomely paid, simply because he can walk about the stage and talk like a gentleman, and who grumbles when he has to be at rehearsal by eleven o'clock—but your real, old, crusted

mummer, saturated with Shakespeare—the man who eats theatrically, drinks theatrically, walks and talks and thinks theatrically. I felt that if blank verse would be agreeable to any customer, this was the man. I therefore launched out. The scene shall be cast in dramatic shape, then you will the better appreciate it."

CHARACTERS.

A MUMMER. TWO CLERKS. A MESSENGER.
THE AUTOCRAT OF THE OFFICE.

SCENE:—*A branch of the Phoebus Insurance Company.*

Enter Mummer.

MUMMER (*approaching counter, and beckoning to Second Clerk with a theatrical air*) : A word with you.

SECOND CLERK (*coming forward*) : Right willingly, good sir.

MUMMER (*scenting blank verse, and pricking up his ears*) : You are to know, young man, what I propose.

'Tis my intention to insure my house.

Aye, and its contents, too.

SECOND CLERK : Right well designed !

A wise ambition, truly.

MUMMER : Say you so ?

Then break to me the purport of this scrip.

(*Produces official document, which sets forth in mystic language the ways and methods of the insurance business, and the peculiar advantages to be gained by dealing with the Phoebus Fire Insurance Office.*)

SECOND CLERK (*who isn't particularly familiar with the subtleties of the business, summons First Clerk, who is*) :

I prithee leave thy desk awhile, companion,
And read the secret verities which here,
Hidden like flies in amber, 'neath this scroll,
Do puzzle and amaze our customer.

FIRST CLERK (*coming forward with alacrity*) :

That will I, i'faith.

SECOND CLERK (*to Mummer*) : And mark him shrewdly.

For this same gentleman is as a Daniel
In the dark hidden ways of Fire Insurance.

MUMMER : Avaunt ! The matter lies within a nutshell.

'Tis, briefly, as I shall unfold it, thus—
Item, my household goods, and chattels also ;
Item, my house, and eke my lean-to washhouse ;
Item, my jewels, and theoretic hose—
These things against the lurid bolt of Jove,
Or Vulcan's flames, or Vesta's homely brand,
I would insure withal, and that at once.

Say, younglings, do I make my purpose plain ?

SECOND CLERK : So plain, my lord, a fool could read
your drift.

FIRST CLERK : Well spoken. Now, my lord, give heed
to me.

For what round sum wouldest thou insure this house ?

MUMMER : Five hundred golden pounds.

FIRST CLERK (*noting it down*) : 'Tis vastly well.
Now straight unfold the substance of the house.

MUMMER : 'Tis a good house as any in all Brixton.

FIRST CLERK : We doubt it not, but fain would know
the substance.

MUMMER : Why, brick or stone, or else the landlord
lied.

The roof is covered o'er with fine blue tiles.

FIRST CLERK : Enough. The occupation—is it private ?

MUMMER (*lapsing into prose*) : Why, yes, for a public man may have a private house, an' it please him.

FIRST CLERK : You are in the right. Truly, I think none can desire a private house more than a public man.

SECOND CLERK : Aye, yet 'tis ever the weakness of the private man to desire the public house.

MESSENGER (*hurriedly, and in quite modern prose, to First and Second Clerks*) : There's about a dozen people waiting.

SECOND CLERK : Begone varlet !

MESSENGER (*annoyed*) : It's werry well, but you didn't ought to be play-hactin' now, and all them people waitin'. The gov'nor's got 'is heye on you both.

MUMMER : Now to my lares and penates, boys.

The fates have dealt but scurvily with me,
And much I fear three hundred pounds or so
Will amply cover all the goods I have.
So set it down ; and now my purse I draw
Forth from the inner pocket of my——

AUTOCRAT (*suddenly and unexpectedly appearing, to the dismay of First and Second Clerks*) : What is going on, gentlemen ? I hear a good deal of noise, which cannot be necessary. There are a number of the public waiting. (*Takes paper from Second Clerk.*) I see—quite so—quite so. (To Mummer) Our surveyor will call upon you shortly. Good morning.

MUMMER (*cowed by terribly business-like bearing of the Autocrat, but keeping it up to the last*) :

Why, then I'll go upon my way at once.
Farewell, a long farewell to——

AUTOCRAT (*cutting him short*) : Good morning ; the door on your right.

(*Mummer wants to make an exit speech, but is hustled out by messenger before he can collect his ideas.*)

AUTOCRAT (*To First and Second Clerks*) : If I hear any more of this disgraceful tomfoolery, I shall report both of you to the head office.

FIRST CLERK } *(simultaneously)* { It shan't occur again,
SECOND CLERK } *(simultaneously)* { sir !

(Curtain.)

“ Blank verse was crushed out of my official life in that brutal way. We never tried it again, but you will see for yourself how it brightened the toil of office duties, and introduced an element of art and poetry into the more or less prosaic occupation of insuring property against fire. Just reflect if all business could be conducted like that, consider if the ordinary etiquette of society made it necessary to speak in blank verse ! The result would be that, after a generation or two, the educated classes would *think* in blank verse.”

“ And if they did so ? ” asked my Laugher.

“ Why, imagine the solidity and splendour and weight of a people who even thought thus. The ear is educated from childhood, the mind is elevated—candidly, I believe that such a system would prove, in practice, of huge benefit to every English-speaking race. There is melody in the song of birds and the varied utterances of beasts. The rivers sing on their way to the sea ; the sea utters awful harmonies in the hands of the wind ; Nature,

indeed, always works to music. Why should man alone labour in a barren dialect, where no music is?"

"In this age of electricity and vulgarity," began my Laugher, "there appears scant time, and scantier space, for beauty and adornment. The world grows garish. Man lives faster than I have ever known him to live before. There is an inclination to turn night into day, which is new to me. The secret of repose has been lost, together with much else they knew in Egypt. You asked me for a picture from the past. It is too late to-night to give you one; but remind me to-morrow, and I will discourse to you. I shall deliver a monologue; you must rest content to listen, and not interrupt me."

"Your subject?" I asked.

"A vision of repose—a thought upon that Theban miracle, Memnon. I will tell you things that man does not know to-day."

"You can be serious, then?"

"The contemplation of one's own youth is always serious, even to me. Anon I will echo to you high matters. To-night, as you have done most of the talking, you had best make an end of it yourself. From your study window this morning I discerned you walking about your garden, and taking note of the first

dawnings of spring. Is there, perchance, any novel thought born in your mind from the contemplation of Nature reviving herself once more?"

"No," I said ; "nothing worth mentioning. But I wrote a little thing—a sonnet to the yellow crocuses. We might finish the evening with that——?"

He gave me permission to recite it, which I did, and so ended our communion for the night.

CROCUSES.

Hail, little saffron messengers of spring !
Again your sudden, leaping, laughing fire
Peeps through the fringes of the sad attire
Old winter wears ; again you brightly fling
The hoarded sunshine that your blossoms bring,
Where all may see and linger and admire,
And read, in every golden cup and spire,
A promise of the world's awakening.
You shadow forth delights you cannot see,
You tell of glories which you cannot know ;
On the cold earth you write a certainty,
Then gather up your scattered gold and go ;
And man will quite forget you presently—
He's wont to treat his minor prophets so.

"Why forget them ?" asked the Laugher.

"It is human nature," I answered. "Only market - gardeners and Dutch bulb - sellers remember crocuses when the summer comes.

I, who have written this, and thought so much about the merry yellow flowers to-day, shall anon make love to the lily, and flirt with the red rose ; and while I do so my feet, like enough, will trample on the crocus's grave."

CHAPTER IX.

My nocturnal ways—Dear old Poglad—His wife can still astonish him—He foretells signs and wonders—Miracles—The perambulator—The fiend Gossip—More surprises for Poglad.

On the following evening I was all attention for my Laugher's promised monologue. Then, just as he prepared to begin, evil luck sent a friend, and the bust bowed down his head and was silent.

I greeted my late visitor in no happy mood; first, because his advent robbed me of an entertainment I had looked forward to throughout the day, and, secondly, because I hold it a vile thing for men to pay the father of a family and husband of a wife visits after midnight. The home of the married man should be sacred from 11.30 p.m., but people never realize this with me. On the contrary, my own nocturnal ways being generally known, certain dissolute companions of my earlier days still choose the old abandoned time,

because they know I shall then be found alone. Even married men—more shame to them!—will creep out after nightfall and drink whisky with me, and all pretend they are giddy bachelors again, and say many sprightly things, but invariably wind up a sitting with the conviction, repeated by each in different language, that there is no state like that of the married. They say this heartily and emphatically, and then crawl guiltily home to the sleeping partners of their different little domestic firms.

But in the case of dear old Poglad, who now came in to see me, annoyance could not live for any length of time, and I also felt that the Laugher would overlook this interruption, for it was conceivable that even he, in all his centuries of existence, had never come across anything quite like Poglad. My friend was about sixty years of age, and yet he found life as full of surprises and astonishments as a kitten must find it. People said of him that he had been born with his hair standing on end, and had lived in an atmosphere of amazement and wonder ever since. I do not think that he ever was out of England in his life, but humdrum home existence appeared to be a regular fairy story, viewed through Poglad's spectacles. Though merely

a tea-broker in a small way, he yet contrived to cram his life with matter for excitement and sensation. His business letters invariably began with the statement that he was much amazed at something, or extremely surprised at something, or utterly failed to understand something, or felt quite thunderstruck at something. And in everyday life it was just the same. His family, his friends, his private affairs, the state of his health—each and all fairly took his breath away many times in every four-and-twenty hours of his existence. Personally, I should have judged it as absolutely incredible that a man who had been married forty years to one woman could ever be genuinely surprised at anything she said, or did, or thought. Even a wife, as a rule, merely repeats herself after forty years of it; but Poglads was always finding new points for admiration in his better half's character. He told me once in confidence that he believed it would take him all eternity to fathom her; and yet Mrs. Poglads is not what one would call a deep woman. Naturally, after such a life of wonder, Poglads always looks the very incarnation of startled astonishment, and upon that evening, when I answered the front door, he burst in so full of excitement that, had I not known him, I should have said, at a first

glance, the man came to tell me something exceptional was on fire, or the Government had resigned.

"My dear fellow," he began, "the most extraordinary thing has happened. I was just stoking my garden stove for the night, and chancing to come back by way of the orchard house, I found—positively I found *two* of the buds on the peach-tree *out!* Only the fifth of the month and peach blossom out—why it's unparalleled! People simply wouldn't believe it if I wrote to the papers."

"Yes, they would," I said. "Come and look at my tree. It's been out in blossom a week."

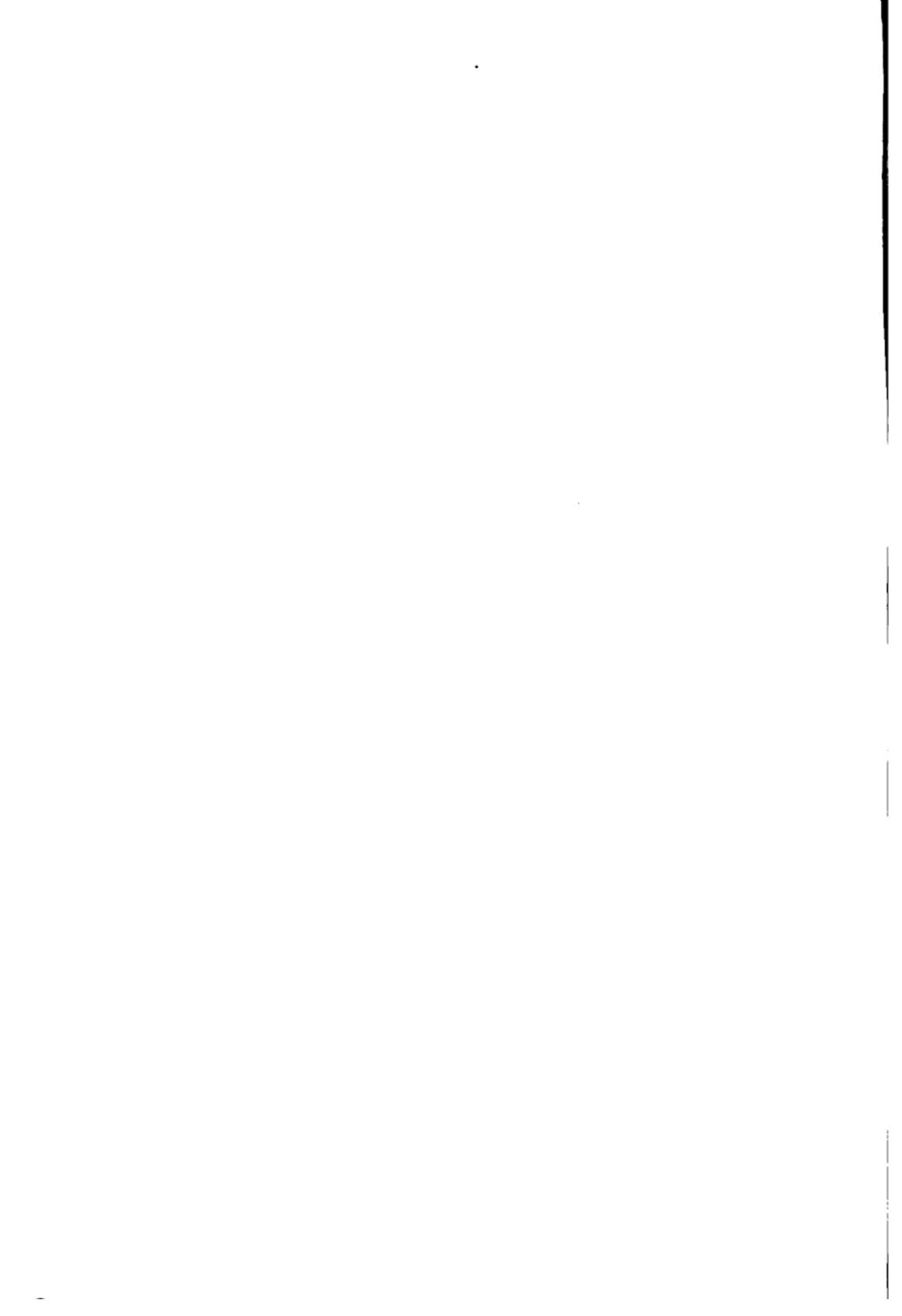
"You astound me," he declared. "I believe we are in for a most extraordinary summer, I do indeed. Why, the birds will begin mating in a month, if this weather goes on."

Then I almost held him down in his chair, and told him that two amorous house-sparrows had already started to arrange a nest in the ivy that grew upon my walls.

"Good Lord! and only the fifth of the month! That beats anything! You ought to take steps to get the circumstance known—you really ought. It's simply not true to nature—a *lusus naturæ*—don't you think so?



"Good Lord! That beats anything!"



I never heard of the like. A *rara avis*—in fact, two. You ought to get the nest of the birds photographed, or something—candidly, you owe it to the naturalists. Marvellous!"

I gave him some whisky, and let him collect himself before springing further miracles upon him. When I thought he could bear it, I told him that the wheel had come off a perambulator belonging to some folks next door but three—that the thing had happened that very afternoon in the open street, and that my wife had been passing at the time. Poglad was much moved, and did not let me finish.

"Thank God!" he said, "thank God she was passing, my dear friend." He got up and shook hands; then continued, "Your good wife may have saved a human infant. Doubtless she did do so, for what is the average nursemaid at a crisis? Why, nothing. Probably but for your wife, my dear fellow, there would be mourning next door but three. I take it she hurried forward and rescued the child?"

"No," I said, "she didn't; the perambulator was empty."

"Empty!" echoed Poglad, in bewildered surprise. "An empty perambulator! By Jove, that's curious, isn't it? What on earth should anybody want to be wheeling an *empty*

perambulator about for? What awfully rum things one hears. The world's full of 'em."

"Yes," I admitted, "and that reminds me. Who do you think are going to be married? I'm no talker, as you are aware, but one cannot help becoming possessed of the local news. That little fiend Gossip gets into a house by some mysterious magic of his own. Nobody ever brings him in, of course, but he creeps everywhere. He comes home in the washing; he lies secreted in the groceries; he drops into the milk, and enters the house sitting astride meat from the butcher's, or fish, or fowl, or potatoes. He is bundled into the cellar with the coals; sometimes I believe people bring him in on their muddy boots. Certainly he is a vulgar little brute, and often enough storms a house by way of the back door. But he can come through the front, too—generally on the tongue of a silly woman. We who live in small places know something about the ways of Gossip. There are certain women, my dear Poglad, whose husbands go up to town every morning, and leave them much leisure. The fiend Gossip haunts these people assiduously, and finds snug lodging in their stupid, senseless, mischievous mouths and empty heads."

"That is all true, and I could give the

names if I liked, though I wouldn't dream," said Poglad; "but you mentioned a surprise—an engagement?"

I told him the secret. It was a very matter-of-fact business—quite the ordinary arrangement between a young man and a young woman with expectations. They loved one another immoderately, and designed to get married as soon as somebody else died. But Poglad was almost unnerved.

"Well, honestly, I've never been more astonished in my life," he said—a handsome admission enough, coming from him. "*Those* two, of all people in the world! Utterly unsuited—hopelessly. I trust her aunt will break it off; I pray she may do so."

"The aunt's delighted, so I'm told."

"*Delighted?* Then she's going mad. She will be the third case of insanity here in five years. That will amount to an epidemic, I should think, and do the place fearful harm. It's an absolute mystery, but I've noticed that insanity often goes with a clay soil."

After this assertion he drank up his refreshments, and, seeing my Laugher, started with admiration and renewed surprise.

"What a magnificent antique! I congratulate you heartily. Doubtless very ancient—a hundred years old, I dare say?"

"Nearer five thousand," I answered, and Poglad fell back as though the tremendous fact had shot him.

"Man, you overpower me! I had no idea there was anything so ancient in the world!"

He gazed upon my Laugher with humble reverence, and then I sprung another surprise upon him: I told him the time.

"D'you know it's nearly one o'clock, my dear Poglad?"

He was knocked over again. He leapt from his chair; his eyes, which had been starting out of his head for sixty years, projected as usual, reflecting a very world of amazement.

"Nearly ONE!" he gasped. "Merciful Providence, it can't be, surely?"

He dragged out his watch, gathered the truth, and said I might knock him down with a feather, if I cared to do so. But I declined an experiment so brutal, and opened the front door for him. A cab rattled past, and his lynx-like eye for anything out of the common instantly noted it.

"That's odd—a cab out at this time of night. I wonder if there's anybody in it, or if it's simply going to the yard."

"Why not tear after it, and ascertain?" I asked; but Poglad, to do him justice, never

sees a joke. The world is full of wonder for him, but no laughter.

"My dear fellow, I wouldn't on any account. It might give offence. People are so touchy," he said.

"You could hang on behind, and so trace them down," I suggested.

But he shook his head.

"I think not. If I felt it was a duty, and that I ought to do it for the common good, then I should not hesitate; but if you come to reflect, you will see that it's a policeman's work. No, really, I wouldn't interfere, on any account. Good-night. And don't say a word about that cab—there's a good fellow. It is always better to keep quiet concerning uncommon occurrences. That is my rule, at any rate. Then you escape being summoned at police-courts, and all that sort of thing. I've never appeared in public in my life, thank God, and hope it may not be necessary. I think it would kill me to see myself in print. What an extraordinary dark night, isn't it? Most unusual."

Then he stole away home.

Dear old mysterious and easily astounded Poglad! The world will teem with signs and wonders for him if he lives five hundred years. In his eyes Nature is not merely an open book,

full of interest and novelty, but a sort of marvellous surprise puzzle, taking away his breath at every turn. The bird on the tree, the egg in the nest, the snail upon the wall—each fills him with amazement; while as to the ways of his fellow-men, they keep the worthy soul in a flutter or tremor of eternal astonishment and admiration, which will last as long as he does. When he dies, which Heaven postpone, I would adorn his tomb with a solitary vast note of exclamation graven upon it.

One o'clock struck as I returned to my bronze. He could not speak that night, but I did, and told him how much I regretted this unforeseen and undesired infliction of Poglad's. Then, noting a little dust upon my Laughing Philosopher's head, I reverently removed the same with a pocket-handkerchief, and then retired.

CHAPTER X.

Sparkes—His misery—"The wife"—Sparkes foretells a boy—He elaborates his sentiments—And fears horrible possibilities—His alarms happily unfounded.

I LIGHTED my pipe on the following evening, and having expressed regret for the interruption of the previous night, begged my laughter to proceed with his promised discourse. Scarcely were the words out of my mouth when a thundering double-knock fell upon the front door, and echoed through the silent house.

"Upon my soul, this is too bad!" I exclaimed, starting up, but my bronze philosopher merely smiled.

"Better see who is there," he said. "The individual knocks again, and louder still. He will injure more than your temper if you do not attend to him."

I went out in no very amiable mind, and opened the door to Sparkes. Now, Sparkes is the sort of man one has to know in this

world for one's sins—the sort of man one invariably wishes at the devil, from no personal dislike, but from sheer weariness and vexation of spirit. Sparkes makes virtue lose all its brightness; he is the quintessence of insipid goodness; he has no light and shade, no marked features, nothing to fasten on and swear at. Sparkes will ultimately go to glory as certainly as the Pope of Rome. That is just the point; all interest in a thing dies sooner or later when we are dealing with a certainty. My interest in Sparkes died after I had known him a quarter of an hour, but the weariness and vexation of spirit had now lasted for three years.

Candidly, I was astounded to see Sparkes, because he had often explained to me that he always went to bed at half-past ten, winter and summer. Personal twaddle of that kind made the bulk of his conversation. Of course, the man had never told a lie. What, therefore, was he doing on my doorstep three minutes after midnight? and what was his wife doing? He had been married about a year to a quite ordinary, old-fashioned young woman, who knew nothing about modern social problems, and whose mind was such that Sparkes proved sufficient to fill it, and even brighten it.

"You!" I exclaimed. "What, in the name of wonder, brings you out at this hour? You ought to have been in bed an hour and a half ago."

"I know I ought," he said hurriedly; and I saw his face was white and anxious.

For a moment I had a gleam of hope. It struck me he was in hot-water. If that was so, I would pardon the shock to my own judgment—I would willingly forgive myself for coming to a wrong conclusion as to his character, because Sparkes, in trouble, promised a great novelty. But it seemed impossible to suppose that this man could have done anything, at any time, anywhere, capable of bringing a frown to his own smooth forehead; while, as to his effect on his environment, he had, doubtless, made hundreds of his fellow-creatures sleepy at different times, but surely none angry or seriously disturbed.

"You're in a fix," I declared, "or else you'd be in bed."

"To some extent, I am in distress," he admitted; and I could scarcely believe my ears. "I would not have knocked so hard if I had not been excited," he said, following me in. "You must forgive it."

"Take some whisky, and make a long story short."

"Thank you; but I think you know I am a teetotaller. I do it for example, and have been the means of getting seventeen of the lower classes to sign the pledge up to the present time. As to making a long story short, there's no story at all. I knew you were late in your habits at night, and I simply yearned for a friendly voice. I can't go to bed as usual to-night. It's terribly unsettling."

"Why on earth not?" I asked.

"The wife," he said.

He belonged to that large and irritating class who always talk about "the wife," as though there was but one married woman in the world.

"Well?"

"Haven't you heard? It seems so curious to me that anybody does not know it. The very stars, in their courses, appeared to realize my position, as I came down the road to you, and the gas-lamps and pillar-boxes. I left word they would find me here. I don't mean the pillar-boxes, but my mother-in-law, and the people at home. I didn't want to leave the house, but the medical man said I was getting upon his nerves, and, of course, that would not have done; so I said I would go down to you for an hour. It seems almost

wrong, I think, to practically send a husband out of the house at such a time. Indeed, I refused to go at first, and said my place was there, come what might; but then the doctor came down again with a message from the wife. The message was to go right away out of the house, and not come back until I was sent for. So I came to you; and I hope you won't mind letting me talk, because it soothes me. I could almost dash about and break furniture, if it was not wrong and unmanly to lose self-control in such a way. But one must be calm. It will be a boy, I know. I've been reading statistics, and a great many die. Providence is so inscrutable in her ways. My mother nearly died when I was born; but she lived to see me grow up, and thank God. My wife's mother, on the contrary, did well. You don't mind me walking up and down while I talk, do you? It seems to kill the time a little. No, I don't smoke. I thought you knew that. It is not a necessity, and, personally, I think to become the slave of a habit is unworthy of a reflecting being. Besides, the example. Not that I hold tobacco to be a vice. I was talking about statistics. The percentage of deaths is, of course, low, because modern science, under Providence, has reached such a pitch of

perfection; but, still, people do die, and you may remember how you felt when this happened to you. Doctor Danvers is a M.R.C.S., and L.R.C.P., and M.D., of somewhere in Ireland; so he ought to be equal to the task. His age, too, is in his favour. His experience is vast; he has attended almost thousands of similar cases. He was very hopeful when I left, but the ways of Providence are so astounding. However, I have an enormous deal of faith, thank God! The nurse is old Mrs. Pitchley. I hear very good accounts of her from several different sources. So much depends on an expert nurse. Doctor Danvers believes in her, so that is well. I kept asking if there was anything I could do, and they both said nothing. The nurse was not quite respectful, I thought. It was when I asked Danvers if he would like a second opinion about the wife, that he seemed to lose his professional coolness. I should fancy it was a pretty ordinary suggestion for a husband to make at such a time, but he evidently took it as unusual. I think you know that I am not one who would willingly hurt the feelings of a fly, let alone a physician. I can tell you, it ages anybody, things like this. You see, the wife is no ordinary woman. I never saw another like her, and—and—well, words won't

tell you what she is to me. I never could understand how I managed to win her ; and if I lost her now, I think it would kill me. Of course, it is wrong and unchristian to say so ; but I think it would. You see, we have been married a year, and we knew each other six years before that. All the time I struggled on to make a home for her. She was my guiding star through those years. I do not say she kept me straight, because, thanks to God ! I never had any inclination at any time to be anything but straight. Not that it is any credit to me. But she made me feel ambitious to succeed ; and I worked and worked, and saved money, and made a home. It is so pleasant to feel you owe nothing to other people ; at least, I always feel so. Not that I take undue credit to myself, because we are all worms. But now, if anything happened—I mean—well—there it is in the statistics—it would seem as though I had been treated rather harshly. But I'm looking on the bright side, mind you. From the very first I said to myself, and I said in my prayers, ‘I will look on the bright side ;’ and I have. But you cannot help human feeling coming to the surface at such a time. It’s curious that I’ve had a presentiment from the first it will be a boy. By the way, I’m not boring you, am I ?”

He stopped to breathe and mop his forehead. It was well that he did. His lungs were giving out. Whether his wife was to be a successful mother or not, she must certainly have become a widow in another two minutes had Sparkes not given his breathing organs a brief rest.

In answer to his last question, I told him he had never bored me less than on that particular evening; after which encouragement he drank a tumbler of water, blew his nose, looked at the time, sighed to see how it was dragging, and proceeded—

“It’s a frightful responsibility, bringing a life on to the earth. There are such horrible possibilities about it. One has only got to read one’s Bible to see that. There will be an Antichrist come into the world before long. I believe divines agree that he is due. Just think what an awful thing: to be father of Antichrist !”

But I could not picture Sparkes as the parent of such a celebrity.

“Don’t let it worry you,” I said. “Be hopeful.”

“Or it might prove weak in its head,” he continued.

“That’s more likely,” I answered heartily, thinking it would cheer him; but he was not cheered.

"I don't think it's *likely*, thank God, but it is possible; because Providence does inscrutable things. I repeat, it is a frightful responsibility, whichever way you look at it. Of course, there is another side. I've a conviction it will be a boy, and it may turn out a great man, or a hero, and make a mark on its generation. I sometimes think the wife is just the sort of mother a great man would have; and she always says any son of mine would be out of the common—but, of course, you know what the wife is: she has such an opinion of me. D'you make it more than forty-nine past? I *must* be slow, I think. I seem to have been here a year."

The same idea had occurred to me.

"Time drags under certain conditions," I said. He couldn't take offence at that.

Then came another knock at the door, and Sparkes was out to answer it like a flash of lightning. I followed, and saw outlined against the night the form of one of Sparkes's domestics.

"Speak, woman!" he said; and she gasped in breathless excitement—

"A—a—buful gal, sir, an' missis doin' well."

"Missis doin' well, missis doin' well!"

Sparkes echoed these words through the great, nocturnal, suburban silence. He then

tore down my garden path without saying so much as "good evening," and fled up the road. I could hear him shouting, "Missis doin' well, missis doin' well!" until distance drowned that noble intelligence.

I sent his hat round in the morning.

"What are we to understand from this wild rhapsody, and from the sudden exit of the man who uttered it?" inquired my Laugher when I returned to him.

"You are to understand," I answered, "that the man's wife has just brought a baby into the world. Our colony is richer by the advent of a little Sparkes, and, as we learn the babe is a female, we may justly infer that the father's fears in one direction at least will prove unfounded, for all authorities are agreed that Antichrist will not be a lady."

CHAPTER XI.

A monologue from the Laugher—Memnon—Thebes of a hundred gates—The secret of repose—The awakening—*Hymn to the Sun.*

“If you want to listen to me,” began my Laugher on the following evening, “you had better bolt your front door, turn out your hall lamp, and so lead your nocturnal visitors into the belief that you have gone to bed. One survives most prejudices and opinions in a lifetime of such duration as mine ; but it is a curious fact, that the older we get, the less we like to be interrupted. Therefore, make fast your doors against midnight friends, and I will speak what I should have uttered these two nights agone.”

I obeyed ; then lighted my pipe, and kept my mouth shut, waiting for him to begin his monologue. After a silence, he lifted up his voice, and spoke these things I set down :—

“MEMNON.

“There is a beauty in looking backward, even as there is a beauty in gazing at sunset upon the shadows of blue mountains which our feet were pressing in the dawn. Rest, then, awhile on the bosom of hoary eld ; listen to certain mystic music that is floating to me from out the far past. There was once a city, and that city, even to this day, rears skeleton fingers from the desert sands. You shall trace shattered columns there, and the graves of kings ; you shall note the precipices which man carved into his statues ; you shall behold the Colossi—those mighty, rock-cut twins that have seen the sun rise far oftener than a million times, and smile yet at Time. And then, as a silver mirage trembling fair over wastes of centuries, I, who knew it, will build again for you that vanished city.

“Great temples rise, and halls of painted columns crowned with the stone lotus. Endless avenues of sphinxes stretch from the temples, and, elsewhere, obelisks of rose granite point against the sky, with Truth hieroglyphed on each. Life swarms over the yonder growing pyramid ; and there is a hurry of many boats upon the breast of Nile. The river is green ; but anon in summer,

when Sirius rises with the sun, these waters will grow red as blood, and overflow the land, and fill the world with such increase, that man's food shall grow out of a mud-smeared desert. The Egyptian is in the streets, and there is a murmur of wild talk on many tongues, for dynasties are tottering to their fall, stupendous changes impend, and the world is full of mad novelty and innovation. But these things we heed not. See rather the lilies that float in the little lakes with white marble shores ; regard the sacred saurians which raise gaunt snouts amongst the crimson blossoms ; note the green eyes and golden earrings of these crocodiles, for each inert, gigantic, holy lizard has much of God within it. God, in a thousand shapes, is everywhere. The hawk, the ibis, the jackal hide Him ; and those that walk these streets worship the Everlasting in strange guises.

“ It is Thebes—first of that great trinity of cities—Thebes of a hundred gates.

“ And what of this giant splendour of statues, this dark seraph face, fuller of subtle mystery than ever man has carved before or since ? Who cut into beauty, and strength, and unutterable sweetness his vast lips of stone ? Who wrought his royal serpent diadem, and chipped with pigmy chisel the

purple porphyry from his brow, smooth as a god's? The face of him is altogether noble; no scar, no furrow ruled by Time rests there; eternal youth is shadowed in the full lines of it; the almond eyes that front the East are blind, and feel the light they cannot see.

"It is Amenophis—Memnon of the euphonious Greek, Memnon, the slayer of lions, the lover of women—that Ethiop prince whom Achilles slew. Nephew he was to Apollo, and son to fair Æos, whose mother's tears still glitter on the dry desert herbage at dawn. In his life he was pleasant and full of power; and yet he stands, the admired, the adored of the Egyptians, with wide, soft eyes ever facing the rising of the sun he worshipped.

"What is his secret? What is the message that he brings to you men? Here, at another century's deathbed, you stand, struggling to be first on the threshold of a new age—the age of the lightning; and already the secret whispered by stone Memnon sinks beyond power of salvation. It has altogether departed from among you; it has fled from your abodes, vanished from your cities; but its shadow still lingers in the still, silent places of earth. It is murmured yet by night winds to forest trees, and yet reflected in moonlight on sleeping waters. The north

wind knows it, and those Northern Lights which do stream and flicker in glimmering ghost dances above the throne of silence. The eternal snows hold that secret, and it broods upon the berg, crimson-crested under hasty eyes of the low, red sun, who fearfully peeps at the pole ere he dips again. And human hearts knew it once in the far past, when the world was young ; but now they have altogether forgotten it, because the sons of men are very busy and very unhappy ; and, hearing that their days are but a span, still go madly about to make them shorter, and fill them with all bitterness.

“The name of the secret is Repose, and in pathos and mystery it ever rests upon the face of Memnon.

“By night he hides the stars, or stands fretted with silver until the moon passes behind his temple ; but, before the earliest light, those that worship are afoot, and devout living atoms, wrapt in cloaks, stir at Memnon’s feet, and peep about, gazing upwards at the image they worship, and away to the east for the day. They wait for the sun to kiss those giant lips into music, for the solemn melody that evermore haunts the ear of him who has listened, for the wordless hymn born of the morning. To them it is more than unearthly

music ; it is laden with prayer, and soars upwards—upwards to the Creator of all, upon the broad bands of light that rise with the sun, and link the Theban desert to heaven.

“ Still, all is darkness ; and then the whispering watchers feel a tremor of air, a sense of coming light rather than any vision of it, a sense of infinite extent, of plains unseen, but known, stretching afar—a subtle sense which the night lacked, and upon which the grey of morning fast follows, as the stars die. Light is stealing out of the thin, sweet air, is sketching, with sure finger, a world that the sunlight will paint anon. Temple and column are shadowed, and white walls and solemn stones set in long avenues, having the heads of holy birds and beasts. Palms cluster black against the light, and a shadow like a cloud takes grey shape on the desert where the growing pyramid ascends.

“ From the east comes that light—from the edge of the world ; and darkness shivers and dies, whilst day stretches out glorious golden arms over the wide horizontal sands.

“ And Memnon ? On his ebon brow there is a flame, and in his eye there is a fire. He wakes in the moment of sunrise, he greets that ascending glory, and lives in an unutterable murmur of sound.

"Is it the tramp of horsemen clanging their wild way to war with barbaric thrill of desert music? or is it the breath of Æolian harps in Zephyr's hand? Is it the dying whisper of a broken lyre, or the song of linnets? Is it the melody of bells chiming over the sea to welcome wanderers home, or the remote thunder of mighty organs whereon the messengers of God play God's music?

"Memnon's voice holds all that is sweet, all that is terrible, all that finds an echo deep hidden in human hearts. His song fills the great world with tears, and draws the soul from man; it surges along the highways of the earth, rolls like a flood through Time, tinkles to the strands of eternity. It is a very monarch of fair sounds, a king in the dim realms of all noble music that has been once uttered, and can be heard no more.

"And here is the word that lay under Memnon's magic music, when the spirit of a dead prince sang through stone lips at dawn.

'*Hymn to the Sun.*

'Hail to thee, symbol of God Everlasting;
Hail, golden lord of all life and creation—
Watchful, omnipotent, sacred, eternal;

List to the music of glorious rejoicing
Which rings through the realms of a wakening world.
Soul of the day, all the music of laughter
That gladdens the homes of the races of men,
Is tribute to thee and thanksgiving to thee.
The earth is thy altar, and from it ascends—
From all the fair things that love sunshine and light—
The song of a world, the hymn of a planet,
Flying sweet-scented with flowers to thy throne.
A token of all that is best upon earth,
Of all that is best in the man and the beast,
Of all that is best in the tree and the herb,
Of all that is best in the wave of the sea.

* * * * *

The sunlight that smiles on the baby of Pharaoh
Is gilding the coils of the serpent unloved ;
The glory that brightens the eyes of the maidens
Is lighting the lair of the sand-coloured lion.
Beams that are adding a joy to the joyous,
Will soften the sorrows their light shall awake.
Watchful, omnipotent, sacred, eternal—
Hail to thee, symbol of God Everlasting,
Hail, golden lord of all life and creation.'"

Then my Laughing Philosopher stopped,
and only recalled his imagination upon the
sound of my voice. I said—

" It's all very well, you know, but that was
exploded long since. There were tubes and
things inside Memnon. The whole trick was
explained years ago."

The Laugher viewed me with considerable
contempt.

"There are men," said he, "who would explain everything, and will tell you the chemical ingredients of the tears of their mothers. But he who is wise yet allows mystery a place in this world, for mystery is good."

CHAPTER XII.

Concerning buttons—Their significance in China—Regarded as substitutes for threepenny pieces—Adolphus Dexter—His button coinage—His rise and fall—Another button story.

"I THINK," began my Laugher, on the following evening, "that you were unreasonably severe to your wife to-day. The altercation, as you doubtless recollect, had for its object an absent button. You implied that life was not worth living without such full measure of buttons as the exigencies of modern male attire demand. Now, buttons are small things to breed dissension in a happy home, if you will pardon me for saying so."

"I apologized afterwards, and went out and bought her a present," I said. "And you are mistaken when you allege that buttons are small things. A good deal hangs upon buttons than meets the eye. The button is at the very root of civilization. An article's true value may be roughly appraised if we

endeavour to picture human society as faring without it ; and imagination turns pale before the picture of a buttonless world. Why, law, order, and progress become idle words without the button to support them. If you want to instance the most unfinished, unhappy thing this earth can show you, cite a man suddenly deprived of some important button."

"Perhaps you are right," he admitted. "I happen to know they have a rare significance in China ; but there your button is not only used for paltry purposes of sartorial suspension and control. He fills an exalted position. Of Mandarins there are nine grades, and each is externally distinguished from the others by no less a thing than a button in his cap. The prime grade wear ruby buttons, the second order exhibit coral buttons, the third rank show sapphire buttons, and so forth, whilst literary men are mercifully permitted to assume buttons of gold ; which you will be the first to allow is a handsome and happy way of bringing that precious metal into a profession often declared to lack it."

"There are other uses for buttons, too," I continued, warming to the subject. "A button makes much the same noise as a threepenny-piece when dropped into an offertory-bag or alms-box, and there have actually been

instances of abandoned persons utilizing this knowledge. The most astounding case recorded of buttons happened to my friend Adolphus Dexter, since dead. I can let you have the facts, if you think they would interest you."

"Proceed," he said.

"Dexter," I began, "was a roving spirit with ideas for bettering himself. He possessed a measure of financial genius which might have made him a Chancellor of the Exchequer, but he scorned hard labour, loathed the desk, and went abroad, like many thousands of other young Englishmen who don't know any better, to make his fortune at learning to farm. Dexter happened to be wrecked somewhere near the Equator, and cast ashore on an island planted by Heaven in the tropics for the benefit of certain obscure anthropophagi. My friend—the sole survivor—was thrown upon the beach, and among the few things, including himself, cast up from the wreck upon that unfriendly shore, were some sacks of metal buttons. Civilization, in the shape of Dexter and a few thousand of brace-buttons, came to those simple savages in that providential manner. Luckily for Dexter, he was white, or those children of Nature had probably regarded him as mere temporary sustenance, and nipped his achievements in the bud; but his colour saved him,

Some suspected that a being of that pale hue must be supernatural, others feared he might be poisonous. So Dexter, finding his life in no immediate danger, except from starvation, advanced among them, making signs of hunger and of peace. Rightly judging them to be but a primitive people, he held out a few of the buttons which had come ashore with him, and indicated by signs that he would give them in exchange for food and drink. Now, these ingenious folks had never seen buttons before, and therefore instantly attributed to them an extrinsic and exceptional value. For three of the metal discs Dexter, who was in no condition to bargain, or he might have done better, received forty heads of bananas, some dozen fowls, five goats, twenty calabashes of milk, a hut, and two wives. He scattered largesse to the extent of one more button, and, then, retiring, slept as only a weary man can.

"To cut a long story short, in the space of six months, by successful speculation, and by always allowing the demand to exceed the supply, Dexter worked himself into a position of considerable importance. Button-coinage was definitely established, and people began lying, swindling, stealing, and fighting for buttons, just as though they had been made

of silver and gold instead of brass. The old folks made wills leaving their buttons, the young ones tomahawked their own grandmothers as soon as these wills were properly and legally attested. In fact, all the horrors of civilization set in, and Dexter finally opened a private bank. He had, of course, mastered their language, and soon showed them the beauty of depositing money on a percentage. I know not what rate he offered, but it is certain that my old friend handled the finance of that island like a Rothschild, and ultimately, as was inevitable, owned every atom of property, from the mountain peaks to the coral strand. The Government hung upon his whim; royalty was deeply in his debt. And then, suddenly, the nation's eyes were opened, and those simple man-eaters began to realize that Dexter was pretty much as they were, with certain added knowledge, and a masterly knack of manipulating buttons. Then Dexter went to the Government, such as it was, and explained tyranny, and taxation, and kindred feats of advanced man, showed how easily those in authority might simply coin buttons out of every hut-holder in the kingdom. But he kept pretty quiet about the landlord's property tax, and a few matters of that kind, because, of course, he was everybody's

landlord, owning the entire island. He over-reached himself in the end by raising the value of hut property throughout the place, and by foreclosing on a mortgage to the discomfort of one of the reigning chieftain's mothers-in-law. Then there was another trouble. The thatched roof of the Upper Chamber of the Parliament leaked, and Dexter argued that no landlord could be expected to go to the expense of an entire new roof on this account. He merely wanted to patch it up with plantain leaves, but the Lords plucked up courage, and had him up before them, and hinted at violence. Whereupon Dexter went home, and issued a proclamation of a revolutionary and outrageous character. He invited the people to flock round him and crown him king. Every man who so flocked would receive three buttons on the spot. Of course the Government felt it incumbent to answer this hostile action on the part of poor Dexter. They ran a Bill through Parliament annulling the value of buttons from that day forth. The Bill was very comprehensive. Clause 9 enacted that anybody found with a button or buttons in his possession, should instantly become mere aliment for his neighbours; Clause 13 decreed that the land should return to those who had owned it before the arrival

of Dexter ; and Clause 32 was of such a nature that Dexter's life became endangered. In fact, three of the king's own daughters were offered to the man who brought the poor fellow's head to the royal residence. The mob wavered, then shouted for the old powers and the old conservatism, and went for Dexter. So he died, and civilization faded out of that sunny land ; and it would be as much as a man's life was worth to mention buttons in the hearing of one of those cannibals to-day. I had these facts from an old mariner, whose vessel once touched at the island for drinking-water. He told me, not realizing how he was hurting my feelings, that the people who ate Dexter had all been allowed to wear red feathers in their hair afterwards, and that the red feathers were to become hereditary. That's the only real button-story I know, but there are doubtless many others."

" If any mariner had told me that story of the man Dexter, I should have judged him to be a liar," commented my Laugher. Then he closed the discussion as follows : " There is a grain of philosophy to be gathered even from such chaff as buttons. The mass of mankind must be content to quote your bard in this matter. ' On Fortune's cap we are not the very button,' is the cry of the world.

But those who have to be content with small things, may always approach small things in a great spirit if they will. Never ignore trifles until you have burrowed to the bottom of them ; for trifles show which way the wind is blowing, and 'tis unwise to trim sail and set forth on any enterprise until you are satisfied of that point. There are to-day thousands of you men breaking your little hearts, and wasting your little lives in the production of wares for which there is no market. Such have never learned the way of the wind, and so make adverse weather of what, if understood, might be a fair gale. I tell you that it is better to grow a good potato than paint a bad picture ; that it is wiser to plough straight furrows than write crooked verses."

"No occasion to be personal," I said ; but he continued without heeding the interruption—

"Some fight for fame when Nature has only qualified them to attain fortune ; some yearn to be distinguished when Nature has only given them the power to be respectable. Not that anybody nowadays is the least proud of respectability. It is a term of reproach with you poor little human wretches at present. Your literary celebrities sneer and scream at honest men, leading honest lives and paying their way. Such folks are 'bourgeois,'

'Philistine,' and so forth. 'Down with them ! Hail, decay, dirt, drivel, and free love ! Let the nation march to the dogs at our call ! Let it be a disgrace for a man to know who his father was.' So these gutter snipes pipe. Bah ! 'tis the old filth that rotted the brain and sinew of Rome. Set these beastly preachers to work like beasts. Let their kindred muzzle them ; burn the poison they spit in the name of Art ; make them live clean, or die. Art to-day needs root-pruning, not grafting. But to return. First, know where you want to get to ; secondly, be very sure that your destination is worth reaching ; thirdly, convince yourself with least possible waste of time whether your powers will ever enable you to reach it. There is no sadder sight than to see a man make half his life's journey upon the wrong road, and begin grey-headed the work he might have done better as a boy."

I marvelled to hear my Laugher thus seriously inclined. I said—

"Blessed if I don't think you want cheering up to-night. I never saw you so thoughtful. I'll tell you another button-story, then cut the sitting short."

"The shorter the better," he answered. "Candidly, I am a trifle weary of you this evening."

"It's a true story, at any rate," I replied, not heeding his abruptness of manner. "Though you never had a mother, and came into the world by magic, you will yet, I should think, appreciate the narrative. There was once a little naked boy in a bath being scrubbed by an ancient woman. The little naked boy examined his minute person with considerable interest and curiosity, as small boys will. Presently something much puzzled him, and, pointing to the pit of his fat little stomach, he asked his nurse for some explanation of it. 'That?' replied the venerable soul, pursuing her task with soap and flannel, 'that's where God buttoned you up, laddie.' "

The Laugher beamed.

"Vastly well," said he.

Then I withdrew, and left him, still beaming to himself.

CHAPTER XIII.

About rooks and their ways—Envy and malice in the rookery—Criticism—A Ruskin among rooks—And a tragedy—The childless hen—Ornithological study in neurotics.

"It occurs to me," said the Laugher upon another evening of our intercourse, "that you men do not learn enough from Nature. You grub too much of your information from print, instead of turning your attention to that book outside your window—the book which costs nothing, not even a subscription to a library—which is always open, and illustrated at every page. You will pardon my plain speaking, I know, but from my bracket I can see you at work. Now, to-day, you were buried in a volume of ornithology; with your head bent low and a frown upon your face, you were reading page after page about rooks. And not a hundred yards away the live birds cawed and chattered at their nest-building in the elms. Had you but wandered abroad awhile,

you might have learnt far more than any treatise ever held or taught."

"It happens," I answered, "that if I have a strong point, it is my rook-lore. Those birds you mention have, for hard upon four weeks, enjoyed my ceaseless attention. I have watched their parliaments and conferences; I have noted their building operations from the earliest foundations; I have observed their methods of construction, their varying intelligence as manifested in choice of stem and bough; and I have done more—much more. Candidly, I believe that it has been permitted me to get nearer the truth about rooks than anybody else who ever lived. That was why you saw me reading so diligently. I design a monograph or treatise upon rooks at no distant date, and I was studying rook literature for many reasons, the chief being to ascertain if those marvellous things I have observed are familiar to other rook experts, or have been overlooked until now."

"What is your conclusion?"

"That, without being first in the field, I may still claim to novel investigation. Either that, or rooks have undergone marked evolution of late years. I find that they exhibit no little human nature in them, to begin with; or, rather, that rook nature and human nature

have much in common. Within this rookery you mention there exist, side by side, birds, identical to outward seeming, but yet with characteristics as marked, and dispositions as diverse, as those to be met with in any human colony. At no time do the traits in bird character more markedly appear than at this season, when the young rook's 'fancy lightly turns towards thoughts of love'—and also the old rook's. Imagine, if you can, an entire suburban terrace suddenly filled with newly-married couples. Then you will get an idea of the excitement, tittle-tattle, gossip, criticism, envy and malice that fills a rookery. People suppose that each pair of birds is entirely busy about its own affairs, and never thinks of the household on the next bough. That is an error. Half the salt and spice of nest-building lies in arranging something rather choicer and better than the people next door. The emulation is most keen. Young hen rooks are like young wives, going in and out among one another's new drawing-rooms. Talk about heart-burning! I tell you I have overheard the rooks when they thought I was lighting my pipe and not listening.

"There were two criticizing a nest while the pair that belonged to it happened to be away.

"The hen said, 'I don't think much of that brown cow's hair, do you?'

"And the cock answered, 'I might have had twenty beaksful, but I didn't touch it. It's not only very common, but very uncomfortable to sit on, and it ruins the whole scheme of decoration.'

"The hen said, 'What are those white feathers? They don't look so bad.'

"And the cock said, 'They're all for show. There's no warmth in 'em, and jolly little comfort. I call this a garish, tawdry bit of work, if you ask me.'

"The hen said, 'Well, really, I don't see any nests I like better than our own. The wool is such a feature, and the horsehair fittings.'

"The cock chuckled, and answered, 'Yes. I kept that dead horse jolly quiet. There's not another bird in the rookery knows of it.'

"Of course such contentment with your own belongings is beautiful, but by no means universal in rookland. The old mothers of families don't care about a show nest. They go in for comfort and security, knowing from experience what constitutes a good, practical home; but the younger birds are different. Some want to build a new way, and have ideas of their own about architecture and decoration

and modern conveniences. Others go in for style and new materials, while the hens—poor little fools—suggest novelties, and turn up their beaks at the old bulky nests. These young hen rocks are certainly most exacting. I have seen one match nearly broken off at the last moment merely because a poor, well-meaning cock couldn't get the facsimile of some fantastic bit of rubbish the people on the next bough had. I heard the whole argument.

"The hen began, 'I won't sit in this dingy hole for you, or anybody. I should go melancholy mad. Any lady would. You can't help having no taste yourself, but you might open your eyes, and learn from other people. They come and look in, and say, "Yes, very comfortable, very comfortable indeed—all so good and solid." Then they go away again, pitying me. Not a scrap of colour, or anything. And I must have a straw dado, like the pair above us; I simply insist on it.'

"Then the cock said, 'Just have patience and keep your nerve, and you'll sing a different tune presently. Likely as not those folks aloft will be blown clean out of the tree, with their artistic decorations and *bric-a-brac*, and all the rest of it, before they've hatched their family. Only wait for a gale of wind. A

nest has to trust to its foundations, not to its internal luxuries. If you wanted a gimcrack, gaudy thing, like a farmer's scarecrow stuck in a plum-tree to frighten blackbirds, you married the wrong rook. I know you think a lot of that pair above, but you wait. They must needs be at the top, of course. Their nest now sways half a yard in a breeze; what will it do in a gale of wind? Why, come down, as sure as eggs are eggs. Look at the foundations—there are none. A wood pigeon could make a better show.'

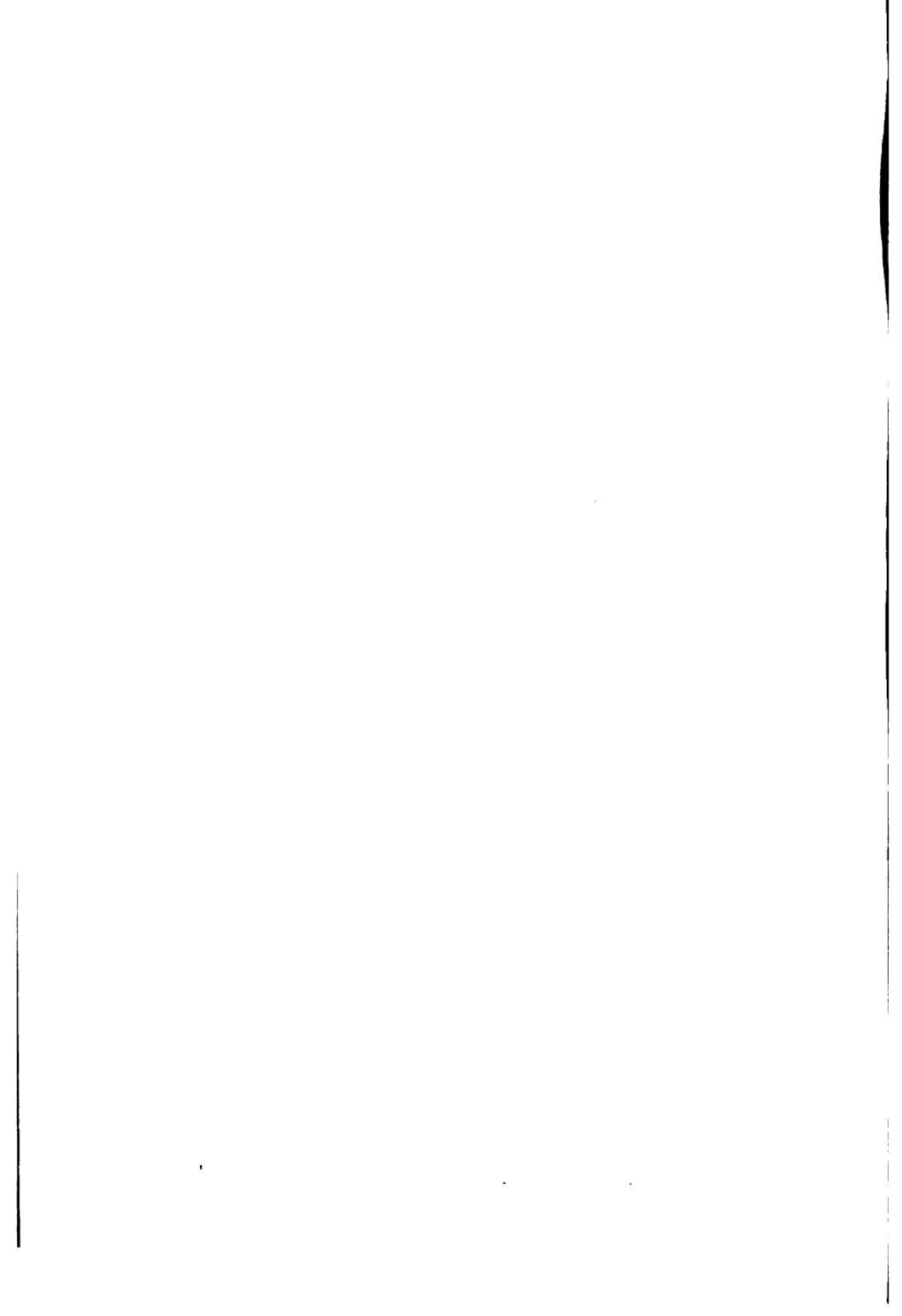
"Then the hen said no more, and prayed in her feminine heart for a gale of wind.

"But I could go on about those rooks until you would be tired. There was one lazy bird, who discovered the fragments of an old nest, and took them as his foundation. The others told him it was simply murder; but he went on and on, until finally the task of strengthening and patching the old work gave him three times as much trouble as a new nest would have done. And there was an immoral rook—he fell into dishonesty. He nipped up some likely rags that had been worked into another property; and they traced the theft to him, and had a convention, and gave him a minute and a half to be out of sight. He went, and his hen stuck to him, and went

too. I will say that for her. She didn't throw him over because he was unfortunate. They flew off together, and I hope they have been received into some distant community, where the circumstance was not known. But a mistake of that kind always comes out, sooner or later; so if they are wise, they will just lie low this year, and build a solitary nest in some lone elm in a hedgerow, and live the past down. Of course, these notes, and many more—all the result of personal observation—will go into my monograph. I might mention one more rook, if I still enjoy your attention. He remains a bachelor—from necessity, I fancy. No lady who has his acquaintance will accept him. He is an artistic and architectural critic—a sort of Ruskin among rooks—and never does a stroke of work himself, of course, having no need of a nest, but spends all his days hopping round finding fault with the times. The old birds know him, and let him talk, and agree with him, and thank him, and then go on as they are going; but the young ones know what a tremendous reputation he has, and get nervous when he comes along, and fidget, and stand on one foot, and drop sticks, and pretend they don't like their own work. Then he caws, and looks wise enough for fifty rooks,



"My dear young people, you outrage the laws of mechanics."



and gazes about him with a critical eye, and metaphorically (or even literally sometimes, when the builders are weak enough to stand it) picks a nest to pieces. He talks like this to novices—

“ ‘ My dear young people, you outrage the laws of mechanics—you do, indeed. Your system is all wrong ; in fact, if you will pardon me, you don’t seem to have any system at all. You can’t just knock a lot of twigs together, and peck in the ends, and then suppose you’ve built a nest. You cheat yourselves if you think so. There are a thousand points to remember. You see, the elm grows in a particular way, and you must take that into consideration. An elementary familiarity with angles is essential. As you’ve settled upon this fork, there’s nothing more to say ; but, honestly, the choice was as bad as it could have been. Not a particle of cover from the east, and a lot of the wood below is rotten. I tested it yesterday. However, now you are here, you must make the best of a bad bargain. But you’ll have to begin again from the beginning, if you want to be happy. Mind you, I’m only thinking of your happiness. I knew your fathers and mothers. It would have turned their heads grey to see a nest like this. And too much green wood.

I see you've built your foundations with it, and I dare say you thought it was a clever thing to do ; yet you are making a grave mistake. It will shrink, and upset the centre of gravity. But nobody will learn nowadays. That hay inside is hopelessly wrong, too. Hay, indeed ! What is the world coming to ?'

" And so on. Then, when he has departed, the crestfallen pair talk it over, and some few take his advice, and end up by having no nest at all just when they need it most ; but the greater number say rude things when he is gone, and decide to risk the laws of mechanics, and chance their handiwork. Of course, when the eggs arrive he criticizes them, too, and shakes his head at the size and shape and colour of them, and insults the parents, and behaves like any human being. There are tragedies, also, aloft in that swaying city —but I fear you are growing bored ? "

I stopped to take a moment's breath, and my Laugher answered—

" Pray proceed. I am never likely to hear so much about rooks again. There are tragedies, you say ? "

" It is a fact. People won't believe what I'm going to say now, but truth must prevail. Remember, I speak from personal observation. One pair built a splendid nest in a splendid

situation. Everything seemed to be going well with them. They had found perfection of stuffs for building, and they loved one another passionately, and life was all one caw of happiness. The other rooks envied them, and copied them, and quoted them, and everything went merrily with the pair—merrily as a marriage bell. Now comes the extraordinary thing. They had no family. The result was that their mutual regard withered and died. They laughed it off at first, and pretended they were glad, and said there would be quite enough misery in the world presently, and quite enough material for rook-pies without any help from them. But, anon, when the baby rooks began to squeak, and loud caws of triumph went up from the neighbouring nests, and everybody was a father or a mother, and glorying in it, that poor childless hen could stand her trial no longer. She flew away while the cock was out upon some business, and when he came back and found that she had gone, I believe he went down to Farmer Foster's, and gave himself deliberately into the hand of a youthful gunner there, so that he might be shot for a scarecrow, and hung up by the neck over the young wheat. It was a regular Ibsen drama, full of social problems and

neurotic troubles and pathos. If I cared, I could make a full three-volume novel of it, with all the life of the rookery thrown in as a background, and a musical *motif* from the church clock hard by which strikes the quarter-hours. I look at that empty nest often, and wonder where the lady rook went to, and if she tried marriage again. Then, if you fancy you would care to hear any more——”

“Candidly, I think not,” said my Laugher. “I have been much interested by your researches, but I have heard enough now. On another occasion I may ask you to give me some further transcripts from your studies of Nature. You appear to translate her open pages in a fashion not usual. I should say your rendering was broad, rather than literal. Still, you seem to know something about rooks. I admit that.”

CHAPTER XIV.

William Fladgate—His experiment in philanthropy—A wise man from the East—And a wise woman—Ted Jones—Amelia Phoenix—Their enterprise.

UPON the following evening our talk had reference to human nature, and the Laugher was good enough to discourse thereon.

“ Masses are built of units,” said he, “ and nobody can probe the great passions and fears and ambitions that are for ever stirring in the heart of the people; nobody can see whither present peace or disturbance, plenty or lack, are leading a nation, unless he busies himself with the units. It is, before all things, necessary to find out where individual thought appears to be pointing, what folks are thinking and doing, and to what goals their convictions and allied actions are likely to bring them.”

“ Exactly,” I admitted. “ The thinker must have his hand on the pulse of the hour, as represented by the man in the street——”

“ Or the slum,” declared my Laugher. “ It

is desirable to feel the pulse of the man in the slum."

" You're behind the times," I said ; " slumming has become obsolete as last year's spring fashions."

" You human creatures," he continued, not heeding my interruption, " are shy animals, and to be feared when you are hungry, and begin hunting in packs. You have never been particularly trustful animals, and you have a certain dangerous power of concealing the secrets that are in you. These facts make the study of human nature difficult, when the student is himself no more than human. A man can only learn a little about other men, even as a child knows not much of other children, or an ant of other ants."

" Do you know more of mankind than mankind knows of itself ? " I inquired.

The question set him thinking, and, taking advantage of his silence, I spoke.

" Talking of units," I remarked, " I can give you the experience of a philanthropic friend of mine, who had theories, and lived up to them. These things that I tell you may possess little intrinsic value or interest, but you must remember that five hundred years hence you will be able to retail them to those who inhabit the world at that time."

"True," he said. "If you would rather hear yourself than hear me, proceed."

"I'll listen to you presently," I began. "But I want to tell you first about William Fladgate. I know you'll enjoy it. He was a man gifted with such generosity that it is remarkable in itself he never ended his days in a workhouse. He had your own idea about units, and was, moreover, of opinion that if the poor are to be practically and materially benefited, it must be by those who understand them. He held, perhaps correctly, that no man born wealthy can comprehend the needs and trials of his poverty-stricken brothers and sisters; but he conceived that if a right-thinking individual could be suddenly taken from the heart of some seething nest of human misery, and as suddenly sent back to it a rich man, that practical good must result. You see his idea? You also realize that nothing would be easier than to put it to the test—given only that right-thinking man out of a slum. Well, Fladgate went out to find him—or rather, them, for he proposed giving the experiment fair trial with both sexes. He not only wanted a wise man from the East, but an intelligent woman also. Thereby a double test of his theory might effectively be made.

"For my part, I always liked the theory, as a theory, but I doubted Fladgate's ability to pick the right male, and would have bet any odds against his selecting a fitting female. He had a trust in feminine goodness which was almost pathetic ; but I fancy he blended, at least, a modicum of serpent's wisdom with his dove-like benignity, for he was a bachelor. Still, the man had small knowledge of the world, and I could picture him beaming about in Whitechapel after a right-thinking woman, and very likely making a most mistaken selection. However, he carried the thing through his own way, and Fate helped him, as she helps most of us—by rendering our beginnings very easy and full of promise. It was, in fact, at a Trafalgar Square riot some few years ago that Fladgate found his right-thinking people. Tom, and Dick, and Harry, and also John, had addressed the mob ; and the mass of units, with one accord, being convinced that the times were rotten and past praying for, had moved off to loot a watchmaker's, when Fladgate felt a hand in his pocket, and succeeded in capturing the body to which that hand belonged. The thief went by the name of Ted Jones. He had been alternately picking pockets and oakum any time for the past ten years, so he seemed ripe for reformation ;

and his acquaintance with the starving poor proved varied and extensive. Ted, indeed, was one of the sort of whom it has been said that he is ‘all right when you known him ;’ and despite the awkwardness attending their introduction, Fladgate ascertained that the man had better qualities than appeared on his surface, and was, moreover, quite willing to learn. Estimable Fladgate ! He always went on the principle that appearances are deceitful ; and as a result, he made not a few mistakes. The fact is, that appearances are very seldom deceitful, given a reasonable intelligence to judge of them. The appearance of a strange hand in one’s pocket, for instance—who but Fladgate would have hesitated to estimate the individual by a peculiarity so marked and suggestive ?

“ But he took Ted Jones home, and on the way a woman begged for a mouthful of bread, ‘for the love of Gawd.’ This petition took Fladgate’s fancy, and touched his heart. He hinted his project to the starving soul, and invited her to join the procession. Then he marched back to his place with his two units. The second was called *Amelia Phoenix*. She was unmarried, but quite respectable, though practically destitute. Fladgate explained to them that he wanted two people with good

hearts to dispense charity in the East. It was necessary that the instruments of his benevolence should have a personal knowledge of the lowest class, and, further, they must possess no private ties, no temptations to pour his money into particular channels. They both declared that they had no relations in the wide world. Strangely enough, they had longed ever since childhood to do some good to their fellow-creatures, and lighten the loads of suffering humanity. Cross-questioned as to their views, they vied each with the other in noble sentiments, expressed with cockney point. Miss Phœnix belonged to Bow, and Mr. Jones had a hole he called home at Stratford. Both undertook to carry on the good work in the district best known to them. They could write, by a lucky accident, and each promised to keep Fladgate informed, by letter, of their success. It was to be a practical experiment, and the philanthropist proposed collecting data, and communicating with the public journals, if results warranted such a step. The man and the woman were both on their honour, and swore varied and hearty oaths of fidelity to the cause and to Fladgate. He fed them, gave them twenty pounds each for private expenses, and one hundred and fifty pounds

a-piece to expend, according to their judgments, in well-doing. They were to dole it it out over a period of a fortnight, and report progress by letter every second day. At the end of the fortnight both promised to come and see Fladgate again. He reminded them that he was in their hands, and that he put his trust in them. He then said a prayer, calling Heaven to prosper the enterprise, and, finally, his butler showed Ted and Amelia out.

"I expect your knowledge of human nature tells you the sequel. When I relate this story, men usually stop me here, and give their opinions about how it was likely to end. Most people imagine that Ted got Amelia down a back street, knocked her on the head, took all the money, and either left England, or was captured while attempting to do so. Others fancy that the woman went her way, and remained true as steel to Fladgate, and did the best she could with the money, until the police took her up for possessing coin of the realm without apparent justification. Some even think that both behaved as Fladgate expected they would. There are other theories and opinions—enough, at least, to prove that it is a great and open question what the man and the woman were likely to

do with Fladgate's money after leaving Fladgate. They would not, of course, have sufficient wit to see that dear Fladgate was a gold-mine ; they would not nurse the capital, and effect a little good with part of it, in order that they might return to the philanthropist for more at the end of a fortnight. No, they would kill the goose who laid the golden egg at once ; by which, I mean, they would throw over Fladgate from the start, and be false to him, and take reasonable precautions that, when the end of the fortnight actually arrived, Fladgate should find it extremely difficult to trace either of them. They might work singly or together ; in fact, as you will see, and as I have said, very many courses were open to them, and it was highly unlikely that they would consider an honest course the wisest.

"What they actually did do with his money, Fladgate only found out by a curious accident long after the event. No letters reached him during that tentative fortnight, and at the end of it neither Ted nor Amelia put in an appearance. Fladgate thought about making the matter public, but self-respect prevented him. Instead, he merely registered a resolve not again to put his trust in units at sight. Other means of benefiting

his race occupied his fertile brain, and he dismissed the experiment which I have recorded to a mere recess in memory, occupied by others not more successful. Then, on a day when I was with Fladgate at Hammersmith, came the sequel. We had seen a royal person pat the foundation-stone of a new charitable building, and declare it well and truly laid. We had cheered so heartily at this spectacle that we found ourselves thirsty after the ceremony.

"'Here is an inn which will do as well as a larger,' said Fladgate. 'It often happens that the small, unpretentious hostleries provide better whisky than those given to much glass window and outside adornment.'

"So we went into a house of entertainment distinctly mean as to the outside, but clean and altogether respectable, so far as one might judge.

"When we reached the bar, Fladgate gasped, and said, 'Good heavens!'

"Exclamation of any kind was rare with him; and, looking round, I expected some startling apparition to account for it, but I only saw a small, faded, frightened woman, with a fallen jaw and pallid cheek, gazing helplessly at Fladgate.

“‘ You’re Amelia Phoenix — at last,’ exclaimed my friend. ‘ I never forget a face — never ! ’

“ The woman hesitated, and seemed to see a loophole of escape.

“‘ No, I ain’t—s’elp me Gawd, I ain’t,’ she answered.

“‘ That voice,’ retorted Fladgate, remorselessly, ‘ and that singular way of pronouncing the name of Deity ! Now, no evasions. I must and will have the truth.’

“ She saw escape was out of the question, and turned to the door behind her.

“‘ Ted,’ she said, ‘ come ‘ere ; the show’s busted.’

“ A smart man, in his shirt-sleeves, with a bright, pleasant face, and his hair well parted and tidily plastered over one eye, stepped into the bar.

“‘ Whacher playin’ at ? ’ he said. Then he saw Fladgate, and grasped the situation.

“ I think I may reasonably demand an explanation,’ ventured my companion, mildly. ‘ I need hardly say I am glad to find you both in a respectable situation ; but touching our enterprise of last year—— ’

“ The man, evidently under the impression that I was a detective officer, and that

Fladgate had spent the past eighteen months hunting down himself and his partner in guilt, asked us to step inside, and thereupon made a clean breast of it.

"On leaving Fladgate, he and Amelia had come to the conclusion that, while the sum at their disposal was quite insufficient for any general philanthropic purpose, yet, as a means of materially brightening the prospects of two units, the money seemed worthy of all attention. As Ted said, 'It was sich a blimed pity to waste it on artsiders.'

"The result of their deliberations we now saw before us. They had married, become partners in business as well, and rented a public-house. The place was thriving.

"'So your dibs done some good, gub'nor, an' took me an' Ameliar out o' the gutter, anyways. An' now, of course, we'll go quiet, if so be we must,' said Ted, ruefully.

"But when Amelia began to cry, and hinted frankly at a pending family, Fladgate gave way. I knew he would. He told me the experiment, even as it stood, was not the worst he had made. In fact, I believe, in after years, he was wont to regard it as among his successes. Of course, he ought to have sent them to prison; but, instead, he

forgave them both, and asked Ted to get us some whisky."

Having told my Laugher this remarkable story, for the edification of generations yet unborn and families yet unfounded, I withdrew, and left him to think about it.

CHAPTER XV.

Arthur Mawdle—An eccentric—His deplorable museum at Peckham Rye—The Laugher makes a quotation.

"I LIKED your account of Fladgate much," said my Laugher at midnight on the following evening.

"I thought you probably would," I answered.

"There is much that is grotesque and unexpected in human nature," he continued. "It is fortunate that no man is wise at all times."

"As to that," I replied, "I know men who are never wise at any time. And some such beings get a fair measure of happiness, too. A man may enjoy life, and yet be a fool. Take Mawdle. He is dead now, and making the angels laugh, if there's any sense of humour in heaven. Arthur Mawdle was, without exception, the most genial, many-sided ass I ever had the fortune to stumble upon. I'm sure you would like to hear a little about him."

The Philosopher smiled. "If it won't be troubling you too much," he said.

"We will take his museum first," I began, "because my opinion is that human foolishness reached its high-water mark in that collection. Of course, speaking generally, I can understand a patriotic man—a man who loves to treasure little curios from this part of the earth or that, where his country has shone. Such an one has an excuse for amassing odds and ends. He may make the fragment of an exploded shell, or the rag of a tattered flag, his idol; he may glory in old bones, and conjure from a withered skull the spectacle of victorious armies and bloody fields. Such a man will treasure relics like the religious enthusiasts of old time, and display the same with a thousand times more enthusiasm and genuine conviction than Continental clerical dodgers of to-day. He will have a *boubonnière* that Somebody once took a sugar-plum out of; he will possess an authentic button off Somebody's coat-tail; a veritable stock worn by Somebody else. He will show you a king's walking-cane, a hero's epaulettes, a poet's shoe-buckle, a heroine's scent-bottle, a queen's glove. He may have a sprig of the Osborne myrtle, a fragment of the *Royal George*, a chip from a tree that Gladstone

felled. Silver trinkets most surely adorn his store, and beauty patches, and puffs, and pomanders. A Bible with a bullet in it, a love letter from a prince, a locket with hair from a famous head that made an end of life rolling in sawdust—these things, and a thousand others like to them, such a man would beautifully enshrine in elegant Chippendale show cabinets on spider legs. He would have precious miniatures upon plush, and bigger portraits in gold frames. His possessions give salt to the life of their owner, and he himself is a treasure-house of shreds, and scraps, and scandals from old history. We go to see him and wander round, and make apposite remarks, and presently depart, proudly conscious of having kept the tenth commandment, even in presence of Oliver Cromwell's toothpick ; we may, in fact, spend many hours in company of such a personage, and then go home, thinking but little the worse of him.

" But with Arthur Mawdle the case was altered. He expected you to waste precious time in what I can only call a private, domestic museum. The most venerable exhibit it contained once belonged to his wife's grandfather ; the most recent contribution had come from his youngest son. I really blush to write about that entertainment at

Mawdle's. Nothing but utter fatuity and grotesquely bad taste combined could have been responsible for it, or countenanced it. Had I been a member of the man's own family, this exposition must have disheartened me beyond measure, and I should have exerted my best endeavours with Mawdle to make him shut it up once and for all; but to think that he could open its sacred portals to a stranger quite staggered me. It also staggered me to believe that the poor soul fancied the inspection of his treasures gave outsiders pleasure. It is, of course, allowed a man to play the fool in his own house, and before his own family circle. Indeed, many people who are quite intelligent abroad, take advantage of this dispensation, and conduct themselves when on their own hearthrugs in a way which often makes even dumb animals stare. There is no objection to that. It gives pleasure to wives and children and female relations generally. But I protest against people who reveal social and domestic eccentricities to me; I protest against people who, on a first or second visit, deluge me with their petty private interests and fusses and peculiarities. There is little delight, even in a scandal, if you are familiar with none of the parties; and nothing is more embarrassing than to be the recipient of

confidences, when you know the people concerned but slightly, and have no wish to be better acquainted. I think Arthur Mawdle was wrong to have designed his museum, wrong to have carried it out and taken pride in it, wrong to have put the things he did into it, and doubly and trebly wrong to have shown them to anybody when collected. I also think that his wife was very wrong and mistaken to encourage him in his absurdity as she did, though certainly all the most prominent features of the show consisted of exhibits from her family.

"The Mawdle Museum occupied a big room at the back of its owner's house in Peckham Rye. The walls were hung with photographs, beginning with a silhouette of Mrs. Mawdle's grandmother, and completed by a fine portrait of the last Mawdle baby, arranged in straw, looking out of a hamper. Under the silhouette appeared one of the gems of the entire show —a pair of boots in a glass case. They had been worn by Mrs. Mawdle's grandfather at Waterloo. They were in perfect condition, and beautifully polished. There was not the least sign of battle about them. They seemed to suggest that Mrs. Mawdle's grandfather had done little of note at Waterloo. Perhaps he merely used them for running away in. I

thought this, but, of course, did not say it. Then there was a model of a ship, also in a glass case, which Mrs. Mawdle's father had commanded, and been ultimately wrecked and drowned in. Upon this model was pasted a letter written by the sole survivor of the disaster. The next exhibit proved to be hair from the head of Mrs. Mawdle's mother, cut off upon her forty-third birthday; and, after that, came Mrs. Mawdle's mother's voice in a phonograph, bottled a week before her death.

"'You should hear it,' declared Mrs. Mawdle. 'It's so wonderfully natural. It seems to bring dear mother back again to us.'

"But Mawdle said the apparatus was out of order. We were next detained by some worsted-work achieved by an aunt of Mawdle's when she was ninety-eight, and for the most part paralyzed. He lingered fondly over this. It was the first contribution of the Mawdle family proper, and I think the best. He also showed me a splinter from the same aunt's coffin, which seemed to imply that the worsted-work had been too much for her. A stuffed dog, which had belonged to Mrs. Mawdle's half-brother, was not unduly dwelt upon; but when we came to the prizes Mawdle himself had taken at school, we naturally grew more enthusiastic.

" 'They are all for good conduct,' explained Mrs. Mawdle, 'which makes them the more precious.'

" I guessed as much. Mawdle must have been a perfectly harmless boy—a boy incapable of coming by any prize which required competition with other boys. But 'good conduct' is a godsend to head-masters when they want to reward a thick-headed, innocuous lout of a lad. I have a 'good conduct' prize or two myself, though nobody remembers the incidents that went to win them.

" I pass over other exhibits devoted to Mawdle personally. One was a diploma of honour for the third best lop-eared rabbit in some local competition devoted to those animals; another was the buttonhole he had worn on his wedding-day, somewhat faded now; another— But you may judge of the whole from what I have specified. Mawdle's rubbish took up two cases, and Mrs. Mawdle had three. Here there were reams of Mawdle's letters—not, of course, for public reading—and poems he had contrived for her before they were married, and pictures he had drawn. There were pin-cushions and baby linen, and other vile matters, together with hair from the heads of the younger Mawdles, and their first toys and first teeth, and so

forth. People don't believe this account of the Mawdle museum, but it is all solemnly true. A man could hardly invent an accumulated horror of that sort.

"We reached low-water mark with a baby's bottle, that had served each of the Mawdle offspring in turn.

"Many's the time I've got out of bed on a cold winter's night to fill that!" said Mawdle.

"I could picture him doing it. The whole inner family life of Mawdle for years and years and years spread out before me. I gasped; my brain throbbed; I felt that if I did not escape from the atmosphere of this Mawdle chamber of domestic horrors my mind would give way.

"It's all awfully interesting," I said; "it seems to bring home the family circle to one. I feel as if I'd known you both a hundred centuries."

"He was vastly pleased at this, and as we left that deplorable amassment, he alluded to a literary design, and tried to drag me in.

"I have often thought," he said, "that I ought to have a properly classified catalogue. I wonder if you'd care to undertake it in a friendly way? It might employ your leisure. Of course I should get it printed, you know, and give you credit for the compilation."

"I told him that when I had enough spare time on my hands to undertake the task I would let him know.

"That is just one little story of Mawdle. I could relate hundreds of others, but I am tolerably certain you wouldn't care to hear them."

"You say the man is dead?" asked my Laugher, when I ceased speaking.

"Yes, he is dead now, and his collection scattered to the winds of heaven *via* various rubbish heaps. His family were all grown up, you know, and his wife had died before him, so there was nobody to care after he had gone. His children were quite full of common sense. I think they were a little glad when he passed away. He died hugging one or two of his choicer curiosities: little toys and old corals, and so forth. These were more real to him than his grown-up family who stood round. He asked them to bury a bit of his wife's hair with him. It was the last coherent thing he said. The Mawdle Museum must have filled, perhaps, three dust-carts."

"A strange being," declared the Laugher. "Your narrative reminds me of wise words written about two hundred years before Christ: 'Seven days do men mourn for him that is dead, but for a fool all the days of his life.' "

CHAPTER XVI.

The Laugher views Past Time—He has a serious fit upon him—And is rather impressive—Unfortunately for himself, he reminds me of a little poem—*Jack-o'-Lantern*.

"You may or may not have observed," said my Laugher, on a subsequent evening of discourse—"you may or may not have observed a fact particularly apparent to me during our conversations. It is this—that in these brief hours, now rapidly dwindling, in which I am vouchsafed to make utterance for the benefit of my temporary owner, my part of the dialogue is extremely limited. To be plain, I can hardly get in a word edgewise. Perhaps that has not struck you? I raise the question out of consideration to you entirely. I have only to make an original remark, or open conversation, when away you go with some story, or reflection, or anecdote. I fear you are garrulous."

Of course, I apologized frankly. There was nothing else to do. I said—

" You are right, and I am wrong. But your remarks always serve to remind me of past experiences, and you are—well, such a splendid listener. I'm a mere chatterbox—a vain babbler—there's not a doubt of it. An elderly fool is the worst sort. In future, just silence me up instantly when I presume to interrupt you or monopolize the precious time. To-night I shall sit here and smoke, with my mouth shut and my ears open. Pardon the past, therefore, and improve the shining present with all possible expedition."

" It is of the past I am disposed to speak," he answered. " It occurs to me that you men must experience exceptional emotions at such times as you devote to gazing back upon the things that have been and are no more. For me there is, of course, no sentiment. I neither joy nor sorrow, but merely experience amusement. I have never sinned; I have never performed a virtuous action. To this planet I belong, but am not of it, and I can, therefore, gaze back upon my own terrific past without concern. But for man, retrospection must be a strange medley of emotions. I suppose even nineteenth-century human beings sometimes look back at the spectacle of their own little lives. Even dying gnats may think of the sunbeam they

danced in at high noon. Yes, I can laugh at the past, but you must ever find it too mighty a monument to excite laughter. For you it must be awful, majestic, pathetic—pathetic as a dead rose, or a wasted opportunity. And yet, with all its sorrows, who is there amongst you that does not rush back to it upon occasion ; who is there that does not wander again into the dawn of his own life, when the body is at leisure, and the memory awake ? I know man, and I tell you that the depth of his feelings can best be gauged when he is looking back. With the present a mere pin-point in Time, with the future altogether shadowy, vague, indefinite, it is a relief to turn, to creep back into the past, and suffer the turmoil of fighting life to sweep on awhile without you. Gaze, therefore, on the things that have been ; wonder, in that grey world, where all is silent, and sunless, and peaceful ; open your eyes upon a state petrified for eternity. Time past has escaped out of the hand of the Everlasting. He cannot give back yesterday.

“ And, once therein, I would have you look no further back than the years of your own life which lie behind you ; I would have you sit in the shadow of Memory, and turn over

the chapters of the little booklet which records your days. Review the current of the life you found so tumultuous, so thrilling, so full of battle, of sorrows, and strivings. Review it, I say, as it lies recorded in Time past, and you shall find the current, so mighty when you floated in the froth and foam of it, shrunk to an insignificant streamlet, shallow, slow, all too muddy, meandering betwixt flat banks through an unsightly land. A bird's-eye view of any existence dwarfs it, and, looking back, a man may well note many mean matters unobserved before. He sees, first, the little figure of himself, struggling, fighting, toiling, temporizing, lying, doing incidental good, making history with the swarm, even as each working ant adds his mite to the accumulated mass of the nest. And Time past misses nothing. All things that have happened since the world began are graven there in adamant. When yesterday this man picked a thousand pockets by the stroke of a pen, or that man took a life, or that other told a lie, each performed an action which took its place in recorded Time, and must endure longer than all the stars. That is a fact forgotten of men ; else to look back, to see mistakes, self-conceit, envy, hatred and malice, greed and egotism, all preserved like ugly flies in amber,

all blazoned for Eternity, would be no pleasing or soothing spectacle.

“On reflection, therefore, it is strange that men should have much heart to concern themselves with their individual pasts. The best man’s past is for him a chamber of horrors, if his memory be good.

“But, perhaps fortunately, your limited mental apparatus prevents retrospection of any thorough and searching nature. Indeed, I much question if many amongst you can see the past with greater clearness than the future. Curtains for ever rise before you, as curtains for ever fall behind. After all, you do little more than live in the pin-point present. And your state is the more gracious. Overmuch memory would be a curse to any man, but you have sufficient for your small needs. Without enough, you would, perchance, be painting yourselves blue yet, and living in caves and holes ; but with too much you would most surely go mad, the whole pack of you.

“Mankind’s memory should be a mighty storehouse, where light and shadow mingle ; for when you have fought your little battles, when your sun sinks to the setting, and you rest, weary and worn, upon the further shore of life, waiting for Death and Night, then

only dreams remain to you—dreams of the days that are past. Those who sang the music of your lives have vanished away; those who brightened the journey with sunshine are no more; there is nothing left but memory's magic mirror. And well may it be with you if no grim, heart-tearing phantoms blot the face of it at the last; well may it be with you if, through the dim glades of the days that are gone, you feel only the faint warmth of vanished summers, hear only the laughter of children, see only the dear shades of those whom you loved, the shadows of those who loved you. All else is vanity but that."

"What you say is most true," I answered, "but it surprises me, coming from such a source. Curiously enough, I have by me a little poem——"

"I thought as much. You always have a little poem by you," he answered, with something like a sigh. "I know what you are going to say. My reflections upon this subject have put you in mind of some effort of your own. They invariably do. And now you want to read it to me. Is it not so?"

"Certainly. And you ought to hear it," I replied boldly. "It is a quaint poem; it took a long time to write; and people to whom I have read it tolerate the thing easily.

Recital of it will fittingly conclude this serious evening. The verses are, in fact, a sermon on the vanity of those affairs we men prize most highly. I have called it ‘Jack o’ Lantern.’ ’Twas written to show how, when we find ourselves ‘waiting for Death and Night,’ as you put it, we see that the world is hollow and ash-colour; we note that her fairest prizes—the treasures we wasted our health and risked our souls for—are no more than mere marsh fires flickering in a rotten environment, and bred from a decaying order of things.”

“ Better read it,” said the Laugher. “ Your verses always need such a deal of explanation before you utter them. Poetry should speak for itself, and not want a showman.”

I felt the truth of this, so turned to a portfolio, brought forth papers, and read the following effusion without further preliminary.

Jack-o’-Lantern.

I.

I see a wan, glimmering light, little Jack,
On the fringe of a midsummer night;
But, for once, I’ll not roam
O’er thy dangerous home.
Though thy lantern’s so subtle and bright, little Jack,
’Tis the beacon to many a plight.

II.

Thy brothers and sisters, I know, little Jack ;
Up and down the wide world do they go.
How they gleam and they shine,
With a light that to thine
Is the sun to a shooting star's glow, little Jack !
And we follow and struggle below.

III.

A wonderful fellow called Gold, little Jack,
Leads the dance of the young and the old.
He is greater than thou,
Yet I cannot tell how,
For he's only a glorified mould, little Jack
Thou art glorified vapour, I'm told.

IV.

There's a Shadow that men have called Fame, little
Jack,
Claims the great ones of Earth for her game.
'Tis the loftiest soul
Dimly dreams of her scroll ;
But as futile as thy fleeting flame, little Jack,
Is the record that blazons each name.

V.

There's a ghost called the World's Good Repute, little
Jack,
And his might who shall dare to dispute ?
At that phantasm's beck,
Half mankind bow the neck ;
Half mankind cringe and lie for the fruit, little Jack,
Of the World's universal salute,

VI.

Gang thy way to the marsh or the moon, little Jack,
For grey dawn must come glimmering soon.
'Twill extinguish thy lamp,
As grey Death's sudden damp
Drowns the lights and delights of Life' noon, little
Jack,
Kills the singer and strangles the tune

VII.

When his shadow upon me shall fall, little Jack,
And I turn a white face to the wall,
'Tis thy glow-worm of fire,
O'er the moss and the mire,
That will shine as a symbol of all, little Jack—
Of the things I have loved, great and small.

CHAPTER XVII.

Astrology and alchemy—Plato Green—He casts my horoscope—"Mars in the Seventh House"—"The Sun in the Sixth"—Afflicted by the Moon—I am proved a murderer—And promised madness—Apologies.

I WAS so full of a peculiar experience on the following evening that I gave the Laugher no time to start a subject; in fact, to-night my cuckoo-clock had scarce proclaimed the hour, when I thus began—

" You are to know, my priceless bronze, that of late a curious circumstance has much impressed itself upon me. It lies in the fact that man, not content with the rampant and ubiquitous crop of follies which modern civilization breeds, often turns, and that deliberately, backwards to the effete fooleries of his forefathers. You, of all conscious creatures, should best be able to judge of this circumstance, and estimate its significance—you, who take five centuries at a stride, and can

compare the wisdom of the Egyptians with the sagacity of quite recent humanity. You, I say, must surely mark this reappearance of profoundly ancient fads and follies. Amongst these several occur to me; but I am at this moment particularly concerned with two. You will scarcely believe me when I tell you that astrology and alchemy are coming in again, that there are at this moment fairly intelligent beings devoting their time to the casting of horoscopes, and the search for the philosopher's stone."

"It cannot be," said my Laugher. "The ancient sciences you mention are dead and buried now. Each left something to be thankful for. From the ashes of one rose the most notable occupation you men can employ time upon—I mean astronomy; while from the empiric nonsense of the other evolved, by gradual stages—no touchstone, indeed, but a greater thing—chemistry, the science of the elements."

"True," I answered; "yet sorry souls have of late grubbed back through the ages, revived the old ridiculous phraseology, grappled with it—mastered it even—and now pose before their fellows as miracle-makers and wonder-workers in the field of the occult. That blessed word 'occult,' I may tell you, has a

charm for the common herd beyond belief. This world yearns to rend the veil which hides it from the next ; and a knave has only got to get up on a barrel and assert with authority that he has had a peep behind the veil, to find himself the leader of a fool flock immediately.

" Not that I call Plato Green a knave, mark you ; he is an amateur astrologer, and you never met a more earnest man. He has learned the art from a professional, who himself acquired it from Zadkiel—or alleged that he had done so. Green has mastered the signs of the zodiac ; he knows the constellations by sight on a clear night ; he is quite familiar with the planets also. He may be described as a mystic, and he lives in a magical world of his own, bounded by the walls of his house at Upper Norwood.

" I should have thought it impossible for one man to display credulity so vast. He believes in everything—everything, that is, which most persons are disposed to reject, or leave in abeyance, as unproven. Alchemy, oracles, demonology, amulets, fortune-telling, palmistry, rod-divining, spiritualism, second-sight, talismans, ornithomancy, and astrology are a few of the quaint conceits he dabbles in. He dreams dreams every night of his life, and

sees visions at all hours. Like most other visions, they never tell him anything worth knowing, or give him so much as a hint towards his own better and wiser conduct. They are content to turn furniture and bang a tambourine expressly provided for them. But Plato Green simply slaves at his divination, and clairvoyance, and geomancy, and crystal-gazing, and mesmerism, and so forth. He has unfortunately got a small private income, and nobody to care for him. Many people believe in him, and professional astrologers have told him that he will soon become an adept. Naturally he believes them, and toils at black arts, and burns the midnight oil and red and green fires, and Heaven alone knows what beside.

"This man Plato Green, this fatuous, modern wizard, has cast my horoscope within the past fortnight. He begged to be allowed to do so for practice, and I made no objection, hoping that his probable failure might go at least one step to cure him of his insanity. He knew little of me, and I had a notion that my horoscope would not tell him much more. Of course I bargained to be present while he cast it, and he made no objection. I supplied him with a few facts of interest—the year, month, day, and hour

when I first saw light, the longitude and latitude of my birthplace, and other particulars.

" 'I want you,' I said, 'to tell me of my past, as well as what I may expect. Then, if you truly relate the things I know, it follows I shall place the greater credence in your predictions for the future.'

" He agreed to this, and set about erecting the horoscope. As he did so, he explained his actions in succession.

" 'I take an ephemeris of the day of your birth first. That shows me the exact position of the planets on that day at noon. We must, of course, have the exact sidereal time, too, at the moment of birth; then we know where we are. Now, I consult the table of Houses for that sidereal time, and shall find the sign, degree, and minute ascending on the eastern horizon, and those also which happen to be upon the cusps of certain other Houses. Is this clear?'

" I said, ' If it is clear to you, that is all which need be necessary.'

He then arranged a figure of the heavens, and put in the moon and planets.

" ' Each of the planets produces a different sort of human character when ascending alone through the signs of the zodiac; and the planets have different effects in the different

Houses, as you would, of course, expect,' Plato Green explained.

"I said I should have been disappointed were it otherwise.

"‘Now, in your case,’ he continued, ‘we get some mighty strange combinations, arguing a singularly eventful life, both past and to come. Neptune is much in evidence; and Neptune, as you may possibly be aware, has a highly sinister nature—at least, that is the general supposition. Mars, in the Seventh House, is very bad, too. I’m afraid your married life is not quite happy. Am I right?’

“‘If you were anybody but an astrologer,’ I replied, ‘I should be extremely angry at such a suggestion. All I need say under the circumstances is that Mars has made a great mistake.’

“He looked disappointed, and proceeded with the horoscope.

“‘But Mars is clearly in conjunction with Mercury, too. Which means a quick, ingenious mind.’

“‘That’s nearer the truth,’ I allowed.

“‘Not at all,’ he continued; ‘I haven’t done yet. Mars, thus afflicting Mercury, denotes a nature ill-balanced—ingenious, indeed, but prone to put its talents to base uses. Such a nature would not hesitate to

lie upon occasion—or even forge. Such a nature would steal, if that course seemed consistent with safety. You must also be very hasty, and faulty in judgment. Am I correct ?'

"I kept my temper, because Plato Green is old and feeble, and so much in earnest. I merely said I thought the planets were perhaps exaggerating a little. But I think he secretly believed he was on the right track, and pushed forward more cheerfully.

"'Jupiter also in the seventh House is interesting and unusual. It means martial preferment for your male offspring,' he presently announced.

"'Very good of Jupiter,' I answered; 'but my male offspring is going into the brewery business. He may end his days a peer, but not a soldier. He never had any fancy for it—nor did I, for that matter. I believe more in heredity than astrology, so far.'

"'I make the Sun to be in the Sixth House,' he said presently, 'and it is afflicted by the Moon. I'm sorry to see that. It denotes exceptional liability to chills, combined, as one might expect, with a rather undue fondness for stimulant. But now you know, you must fight against these things.'

"'Go on,' I said. 'The beauty of this art

is that it embraces so much. A man ought to be master of his own fate when once his horoscope has been properly cast.'

"He fussed on for some time among various ancient treatises, and *Whitaker's Almanack*—which last work seemed modern and conventional in such company. Then he made an extremely painful discovery.

"'I note the Sun in conjunction with Regulus. There is no mistake about that. It means a violent death. I'm sorry for you.'

"I sighed, but bore it better than one might have expected.

"Then he proceeded, 'Saturn is in the ascendant, too. Worse and worse. Now I see it all. *You've taken a life!* Don't deny it. You couldn't help yourself under these planetary conditions.'

"'Of course I'm not bound to tell you who it was,' I said, and he admitted the secret was my own. He was much moved, and said—

"'I would rather not know, myself; but murder will out—be sure of that. I fear the sudden death I mentioned is now sufficiently explained. Let me implore you as a friend, apart from astrology, to try and mend your ways and make your peace with Heaven while there is yet time.'



"Now I see it all : you've taken a life !"



"I promised I would try.

"'I never saw a man so much affected and afflicted by malefics in my life,' he said presently. 'I have more bad news for you. It is quite clear that you will presently go mad. In about eighteen months, I fancy. There is nothing else for it. Or rather, you would have gone mad if you had lived long enough. But it is extremely doubtful. You have secret enemies, too. That means the police. They may be on your track even at this moment. Truly, I never saw any "native" in a sadder plight.' All this I gather from the fact the Moon and Mercury were in conjunction squared at the moment of your birth.'

"'Pity somebody didn't square all the heavenly bodies at the same time,' I said. Then I asked him not to tell me more, because it was making me nervous. I hoped he might be mistaken, and he, too, said that nothing would give him greater pleasure than to find that something had gone wrong with the horoscope.

"I thanked him much for his trouble, and departed with my doom; but the curious thing is that Plato Green went on worrying about his predictions long after I had forgotten them, and to-day sends me a letter of

the most gratifying nature. I never received so many abject apologies in my life. It seems that when casting my horoscope he got quite out in his mathematics, and also committed various other vital errors. Now he writes to explain that, far from being the objectionable and unfortunate mortal he had feared, I am possessed of admirable parts in some directions, and may reasonably hope to die not only sane but in my own bed. He also discovers that I possess a marvellous hidden talent for chemistry, and, upon the strength of this, invites me to join him in some experiments which have the Philosopher's Stone for their aim and end. I expect he will find a recipe for making magic bronze busts next. What do you think?"

My Philosopher shook his head.

"There is," he said, "a wide gulf between the wisdom of ancient Egypt and the folly of the Middle Ages. This Plato Green is doubtless a harmless, genial lunatic, the probable dupe of wiser men than himself. He adds one more to the gallery of grotesques you number amongst your acquaintances. Folly, like history, repeats itself. In fact, history, as viewed from my standpoint in time, is for the most part but a repetition of follies. The rare man who is content to act upon experience

becomes a genius. You human beings boast that you are wiser than your forefathers, that you have learned from their failures, and are the heirs of the world's experience. But I tell you that your boast is only true in most limited measure. You are the same creatures that I knew five hundred years ago. Evolution has not had the time to do anything for you, and you have not had the inclination to do anything for yourselves. You can control steam, but not your own passions ; you light your streets with electricity, but your souls are dark as night still. Your aims are the same as then ; your ambitions are personal ; your religious convictions fettered in chains. Science has sweetened your cities, but——”

At this moment, and I was not sorry for it, the clock struck one, and my Laugher's reflections abruptly terminated. I think I shall put him under my arm some evening, and take him out to see Plato Green. What a position I and my Laugher might assume in mystic and spiritualistic circles if he only felt so disposed ! But it is useless to suggest that. He would never allow himself to be drawn into any modern foolery.

CHAPTER XVIII.'

A spring cleaning—Disaster befalls the Laugher—From the hand of the girl called Jane—Of domestic servants—My own experiment.

THERE is no sadder sight on this sad earth than a writer face to face with a spring cleaning. When the edict goes forth, when the day approaches and ultimately arrives, only a writer can tell what a writer feels. Upon the evening preceding this annual housequake and upheaval, upon the night before the attack on my study and library, I hinted to my Laugher of the pending horror, and asked him if he would prefer to be removed to some remote and distant place of safety until the spring equinox was overpast. But, to my surprise, he chose rather to stop upon his pedestal.

"It will," he said, "be a new experience. Five hundred years ago the spring cleaning was by no means the event you describe to me. I shall not desert my post. I love a

new sensation. This latter may be furnished by the spectacle of the girl called Jane really doing a day's work."

"She will be under my wife's eye," I explained. "At such times the domestic has no choice. Of course, do as you please about staying: I cannot face it myself. I would sooner go to a Witches' Sabbath than allow my eye to rest upon the unholy revels which at dawn to-morrow must transform this orderly apartment into temporary Pandemonium."

"I can gaze unmoved upon it, nevertheless," answered my Laugher; "and when the night comes, if there is enough left of me to do so, I will unfold to you the things which have transpired."

Time passed. I went for a long walk into the country on the following day, and when evening came, set to work in my study to play for some hours at that joyless hide-and-seek which follows on every spring cleaning, when a man's workroom is the object of it. The average wife's idea of tidying is to put out of sight everything you habitually need, and to fill the old familiar spots with hated odds and ends which you never use and never want. In my case, books of reference, dictionaries of dates, blotting paper, and so forth give place to the little, highly valued, but

utterly useless presents of friends—things I have expressed my gratitude for and mentally banished once for all. But these pen-wipers and paper-weights and paper-knives and fancy ink-bottles are dragged out from the spots in which I have hidden them—dragged out and polished up, and littered over my desk, till the place looks more like a stall in a bazaar than a spot at which a hard-working man earns his daily bread. When little kindly gifts flow in at Christmas, or on my birthday and so on, and subsequently vanish, my wife never worries. She knows that everything will reappear during the spring cleaning. It is a sort of annual doomsday upon which pencil-cases and rulers, pen-trays and book-markers, almanacks and trivial, handy contrivances of every description rise again from their secret graves and confront me.

Personally, I would rather have a little dust about on things than not. Dust is a venerable commodity, speaking of peace and quiet and study pursued with old-fashioned dignity. There is a distinction about it; it is Nature's raw material.

But women don't like dust, and the very motes in a sunbeam shiver when they see my wife.

I was particularly anxious to hear what the

Laugher would say, because he himself had by no means come well out of the spring cleaning. His scarred and furrowed face had received a new hurt; there was a deep and ferocious abrasion across his cheek, extending to the nose; and, of course, when I made a protest, nobody knew anything about it. Even my wife sided against me, and said that I should have put a thing I set such store upon out of harm's way.

"Who did it?" I asked, when midnight at length arrived and the Laugher and I were left alone. "Who is responsible for that brutal dent? Somebody must be to blame, but they all say they know nothing about it."

"As a matter of fact it was the girl you call Jane," he answered, his whimsical visage puckered in a smile. "She is well meaning, I doubt not, but hasty and peculiar in some ways. Your wife was not in the room at the time, and the girl was showing that other domestic, known as Sarah, how to do a skirt-dance with dusters. As a result I was flapped off my pedestal on to the fire-irons: hence this injury. Jane possesses many excellent qualities, though the gifts of Terpsichore have been denied to her. She practises the art, however, with no little diligence when you and your family chance to be out, but her

actions can never much partake of the poetry of motion."

"I shall try what a month's warning will do for her poetry of motion," I said.

"Your wife knows best," he answered; "better leave the matter in her hands. I have devoted some thought to the servant question lately. Men swear and rave whenever servants form the theme, though they never condescend to study the problem, and they are extremely ignorant upon the subject, as a rule. If it was desirable to dismiss the girl Jane, your wife would have done so; but she is wise. 'Tis better to bear the ills you have than fly to others that you know not of. Jane dances when the family is out, and tells falsehoods at all times. These are her principal faults. Upon the whole she is a good servant. You will find that certain failings and certain virtues go together. Thus, a liar is generally quick and handy about a house. A short-tempered, fiery woman is habitually clean in her habits; a good-tempered woman, always ready and willing to do anything, is often slovenly, slow, and hopelessly futile in every domestic capacity needing a pinch of intelligence."

"I believe country servants are miles the best sort," I said.

" You suburban people naturally think so ; and country people sigh for smart creatures with their wits about them, who have been accustomed to cities. The truth is, your scheme of domestic life, like the law, has no cure for small evils."

" D'you call servants a small evil ? " I asked. " Why, the whole question of happy and peaceful existence is wrapped up in them. How can the head of the house sing ' Home, Sweet Home ' when he has a new cook once every six weeks, and the lesser domestics are mere birds of passage too, often taking little mementoes with them when they go ? Where are those old-fashioned retainers who bring you their wages when you are straitened, and refuse to leave you under any circumstances ? Where are the venerable family servants you read about in books ? I suppose they only stick to the people who can give them snug cottages dotted about the ancestral grounds when they get old."

" I think," said the Laugher, " that the slaves of ancient times were much happier than your modern servants."

" Now, we are the slaves," I assured him ; " we are at their mercy, and they know it. I only once myself engaged a servant. I had been talking rather severely about the class of

parlour-maid my wife affected, and she at last, as a sort of subtle revenge, insisted that when it next became necessary to have a change, I should see what I could do myself. She said, with a certain sub-stratum of significance which was not lost upon me—

“‘ Your knowledge of human nature, and so forth, which critics talk about, might be made practically useful. Whenever I engage a new maid, you have only got to look at her to read her character like a book. You had better arrange for the next yourself; then we shall know what to expect.’

“The aforesaid substratum of significance, which I cannot put into print, meant that my wife was laughing in her sleeve, under the impression I should show fear at this suggestion, and decline the experiment instantly. So I said—

“‘ Very well. Your idea is a good one. I will interview the next parlour-maid, or parlour-maids, who may offer us their services.’

“Fate played into my wife’s hand in this matter. Before she had time to forget my promise, the young woman at that time filling the situation was guilty of serious impertinence: in other words, unbecoming freedom of language to her superiors. The

facts may interest you. I had them afterwards. She said to my wife—

“‘ You can’t get a angel for eighteen pound a year ; and if you’d arsked me whether I was one when I come, I’d have told you I weren’t, and saved you the trouble.’

“‘ Whereupon her mistress made answer—

“‘ No, you are not an angel, Selina, and, what is more, there seems little reason to hope you ever will be. In any case, you can take a month’s warning from to-day.’

“ So she vanished, and I had the choosing of her successor. One naturally swears by one’s own journal, and I accordingly put an advertisement into the paper I read every morning. I carried the thing through quite unassisted, of course. When my wife reminded me that the time was growing short, I merely replied, rather sternly, that I was moving in the matter.

“ The first and only candidate called when my wife was out. The girl was dark, with flashing eyes and a love for the primary colours, which chiefly appeared in her hat. She entered this apartment, sat down, and began at once—

“‘ I’m the young person that’s called for the parlour-maid, seeing the advertisement.

I wants to know, please, if a tweeny-maid's kep', and if there's any objection to fringes ?'

" I appreciated her business-like method of coming to the point, but was wholly ignorant concerning the first matter on which she desired information. It struck me that a 'tweeny-maid' might be the same thing as a 'dumb waiter.' I doubted not that it was some labour-saving contrivance, and answered accordingly—

" ' We have everything here to save unnecessary trouble ; the place is, in fact, a very light one indeed. As to fringes, so far as I am concerned, you may plan your hair as you please, provided you are an honest, hard-working woman. I suppose you know the duties proper to your position as parlour-maid ? '

" ' Is there children ? ' she asked, without answering my question.

" ' There are,' I answered ; ' but you will have nothing to do with them.'

" ' And not to wait on nurse, or anythink of that ? '

" ' Certainly not.'

" ' D'you wash ? ' she inquired.

" ' What the devil's that—— ? " I began, then realized her meaning, and answered : ' I have reason to believe the washing goes and

comes in the usual way. As to the place, I repeat, it is a light one.'

" She looked at me sharply, and reflected for a moment in silence.

" ' I can come in the day after to-morrow.' she said suddenly.

" ' You shall,' I replied. ' The wages are eighteen pounds a year. I don't think I told you.'

" ' And rise ? ' she asked.

" ' I should say about seven-thirty.'

" ' I mean, does the wages rise ? '

" ' Certainly. An annual rise of one pound, if you suit us.'

" ' There'll be no objection to me keepin' company ? '

" ' That is your own affair, of course ; only let it be good.'

" ' And 'olidays ? '

" ' Well, a fortnight in the summer and an occasional day when you can be spared.'

" ' Thank you. Then I don't think there's anythink else.'

" ' Your name ? '

" ' Mayflower's my name.'

" So I engaged her. Candidly, I felt justified. Of course I had studied the woman pretty closely during our interview. She was undoubtedly superior to her station : civil,

but not servile by any means ; business-like, well dressed, satisfactory to the eye, promising in every way.

“ When my wife heard what I had done, she showed pleasure but not much curiosity. I was, in fact, amazed to find how few questions she asked. She made one inquiry, however, which discouraged me. She said—

“ ‘ The woman’s character is satisfactory, I suppose ? ’

“ ‘ If I am a judge, yes,’ I replied, with calm assurance. ‘ She is intelligent—I gathered that from her questions ; tidy and clean—I gathered that from her appearance ; business-like and prompt, ready to give and take, experienced and independent—I gathered that from— ’

“ ‘ Yes, I know what a student of human nature you are. I feel very safe,’ said my wife ; ‘ but when I say “ character,” I mean the character she has from her last place. One generally likes to have it, because we are not all students of human nature, and it is so easy to be deceived.’

“ I admitted that this little convention had been overlooked, and my wife raised her eyebrows and said nothing—a gesture which sounds insignificant enough, but may cause discomfort under certain conditions.

" 'I do not wish to advise,' she said, 'as you are arranging this matter for us and spending your valuable time upon it; but honestly, before she comes, I should have a character. You never know. It is always usual to inquire, too, why a new servant is leaving, or has left her last place.'

" To cut a long story short, I wrote for the desired character and other particulars. It would have been impossible to imagine anything more unsatisfactory than the answer which reached me. The lady who had suffered last absolutely refused to give poor Miss Mayflower a character at all, and took four closely written and crossed pages to tell me so. I should have thought it almost impossible for one young woman to be so depraved in so many different directions. A man is, in fact, a fool to undertake affairs of this kind. They need a peculiar kind of experience and nerve which most men wholly lack; and that even though they be the profoundest students of human nature."

CHAPTER XIX.

Tom Bird—A True Account of the Burglar and the Cuckoo Clock—The little grey bird strikes three—Arthur Wright.

ON the following evening a friend came in to see me, and stayed from nine o'clock till after two. I should have resented so disreputable an action, as a general rule, but certain causes made me take the attack upon my time with a measure of calmness. First, I felt what complete satisfaction my Laugher must be obtaining from the story of my friend, and, secondly, the individual had sought me in some trouble, and it therefore behoved me to listen and sympathize with him as best I might.

Strange things are always happening to Tom Bird. Some of these untoward events he brings upon himself, others are the work of Providence. He has more sensational adventures, mostly nocturnal, than you would imagine possible in a quiet suburb. And

these experiences are not mere inventions, mere incidents plentifully garnished and gilded by the art of fiction, but thorough-going romances, full of local colour and detail. Thus I remember, not long ago, a burglar broke into Bird's place in the dead of night. There was, of course, nothing particularly romantic about that, but the way Providence interceded for Bird, and defeated that burglar's projects, can only be appreciated by those who hear Bird himself tell the story. Personally, I believe the narrative. Its very improbability renders it credible. I prevailed upon Bird to write it all down for me at the time, and to give me leave to publish the matter if I saw fit. This he did, and I may as well print it here, for it will be a very fitting prelude to the appearance of Bird himself.

Here, then, is his story :—

"A True Account of the Burglar and the Cuckoo-Clock. Set out by me, with my own hand, this day, 19th January, 189—.—
THOMAS BIRD.

“A cuckoo-clock may be counted a vain thing to save a man, but under certain conditions it will suffice. As the cackling of common geese preserved Rome, so the sudden outburst of my cuckoo-clock rescued me and

mine, if not from death, at least from loss and disaster. As preface to the narrative, I need only say that upon the wall of my front hall, perched midway between a hat-stand on the one hand and a barometer on the other, there occurs a cuckoo-clock. I should not describe the timepiece as peculiar, or assert that it differed, in any particular, from others of like nature, but a solitary distinction it may perhaps be allowed—its voice is greater than the voice of any cuckoo-clock that ever I heard; and in addition to the sudden double note of the little bird himself, a gong-like apparatus within the concern aids and abets at such times as the hour is struck, and a very considerable volume of sound results. My wife detects a third distinct utterance when the clock strikes, though this I cannot myself claim to have noticed. She likens it to the sudden startled uprising of a cock pheasant, or a pyrotechnic rocket. Be that as it may, the clock undoubtedly utters much harmonious clangour upon occasions of striking; and I, for one, when the machine was new to us, was often at first awakened in the silence of night by the echoing rattle and reverberation of it in my sleeping house. Use is second nature, however, and I speedily enough came to disregard the machine, noting

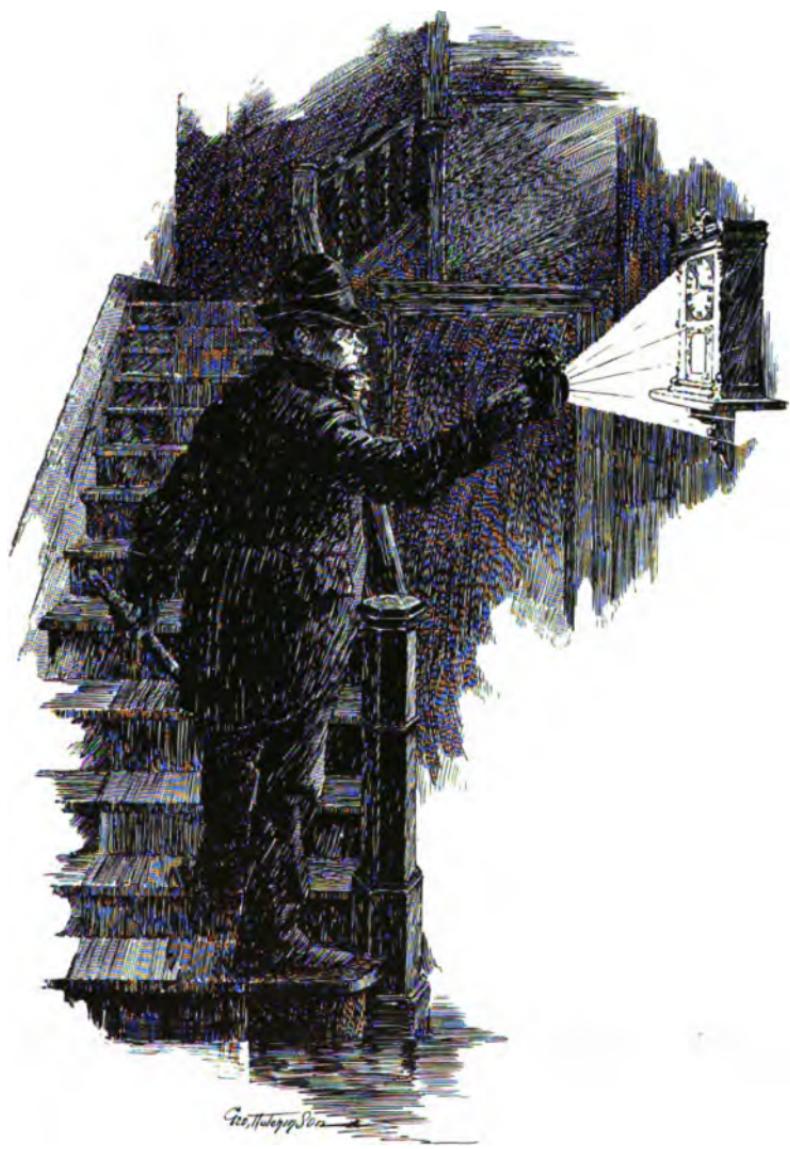
it for a daily moment only when I wound it up after breakfast, and braced its intricate mechanism for the duties of another day.

"So much for the cuckoo-clock. Through two long years it rattled out the hours and half-hours. Faithfully, albeit ostentatiously, the grey bird came out of his hole with a punctuality that set a lesson to the house. I employed him as a text whereon to preach to my family; I boasted about his astounding regularity to friends; I made much of him. But you will easily understand what he has since become to me. I cannot, now, indeed, justly estimate his worth, for I shall never be able to appraise with any certainty the true significance of the task he performed. He may have saved my wife's life, and my own, and the lives of all under my roof on the night in question; he certainly saved my plate and my purse, and probably many minor matters I would have parted with most unwillingly.

"I can picture the scene vividly. It is nearly three o'clock on a deadly dark night in December. My household sleeps; my dwelling is buried in silence, save for a steady tick-tick-ticking from the faithful cuckoo-clock, and merged in impenetrable gloom, save for a weird, unholy glimmer of yellow

light, dancing mysteriously here and there in the neighbourhood of the back-door. What is it? What causes it? From whence comes it? I will tell you. The light is the gleam of a burglar's bull's-eye. He has forced an entrance; the world of that sleeping house lies all before him where to choose. The father, the mother, the little children, the domestics—everybody is at his mercy. Also the plate. Can such things be? Is Providence sleeping, too? Not so! Heed the steady ticking of the cuckoo-clock as its hand of ivory approaches the hour of three.

"Then, silent as a snake, and scarcely less swift in motion, a dark figure stands listening at the stair-foot. A circle of fire dances here and there on steps and wall as he turns his light about him. The ivory hand races on; the grey bird trembles to open its little door and scream danger. Will it avail? Will that oft-heard note wake the sleeping *pater-familias* on the first landing? It is extremely unlikely, but stranger things have happened. Thirty seconds to the hour, and the human tiger has his foot upon the stair; twenty seconds—he has stopped to listen; but only the distant rumble of heavy snoring strikes on his ear. The monster's boots are off; in one hand he carries his lantern, in the other



"Ten seconds to the hour!"



a murderous weapon of iron. Ten seconds to the hour! A stair creaks under his heavy foot; the burglar draws back, and as he stands for one brief moment on the edge of a step, the ivory hand upon the clock-face touches three!

"There is a clang, a rattle, a whirr of sound, loud in the dead silence as the stroke of doom. The gong echoes with brazen resonance; the cuckoo cries his message thrice; the startled marauder jumps, loses his balance, slips, and then falls downstairs with a noise like thunder!"

(Here my friend Bird abandons this thrilling style of narration, and relapses into a purely personal method. It is startling by contrast, but upon the whole more convincing than his artificial introduction. Thus he continues:—)

"Of course, though I am not a light sleeper, anything in reason will wake me, and the noise of a twelve-stone burglar falling downstairs was quite sufficient for the purpose. First I leapt out of bed and lit a match. My wife implored me not to go down. She gave it as her opinion that to face a modern burglar in nothing but a suit of pyjamas was suicide. Even at that supreme moment I admired the feminine

instinct which told her that the noise *was* a burglar. I darted out upon the landing, and as I did so a hollow groan from the foot of the stairs fell upon my ear. The groan inspired me with confidence, for, taken in connection with the noise which preceded it, this sound of discomfort seemed to argue that disaster had overtaken the nefarious thing below, whatever it might be. This was literally the case. I went down to find a big man lying in a heap on his back with one leg under him. I lighted the hall gas, and said, while doing so, ‘If you move I’ll hit you over the head as I would a mad dog, so you’d better be quiet.’

“He answered, ‘I’ll bide quiet enough. I ain’t got no blank chice abart it. My blank leg’s broke.’

“This proved to be the truth ; Providence had simply given the scoundrel over into my hand. I lost no time in acting, you may be sure. My family was already around me, and, rising to the situation, I issued my different orders, and, I think, acted wisely and rightly.

“My eldest son went for the police ; my second boy, who is fleet of foot, hastened to summon a medical man ; I myself took a chair, and sat down within striking distance of the discomfited ruffian ; my wife, good

soul, put a pillow under his head, and talked to him about the sin of such conduct, and the certain reward of it, both here and hereafter ; while, finally, at my direction, our cook fetched the brandy, and I made the wretched creature take a stiff dose of it. He was far from penitent, and, after the brandy, used such insupportable language that my wife and the servants retired beyond earshot. The burglar implied that the world was out of joint, stating the position in his own diction. He then grumbled at everybody of importance, being particularly hard on the Deity, the devil, and myself.

" And then, the hour being half-past three, our priceless cuckoo-clock chronicled that fact, with an effect upon my smitten house-breaker which was remarkable. He lifted himself like the ' Dying Gladiator,' shook his fist at the clock, and swore at it in phrases I have never heard employed before, or since. His use of words amounted to a new language.

" ' That's the blank, blank, blank thing what's knocked me art. I was ' alfway up your blank stairs when it goes off like a blank volcano, as if the blank world ' ad bust up, and I starts and slips, and ' fore I known who'd spoke I finds my blank self on the doormat, and my blank leg somewhere under my arm.

You wait, that's all. If I'm in for twenty year, I'll take the starch out of you and your blank cuckoo, fust thing I come art.'

"I gave him some more brandy, and urged him to reserve his statements for a future occasion. I said—

"' You may not be aware of it, but all you tell me in fancied confidence now will most certainly be used as evidence against you.'

"Then he relapsed into hyperbolic language again, and cursed me and my cuckoo-clock with a vigour I should hardly have expected from one in such straits.

"I asked him if he had accomplices, but he refused to tell me. He explained that I might blank well find out for myself; and then, being apparently exhausted, he relapsed into stubborn silence, which was only broken upon the arrival of the police and a surgeon. The man had contrived a compound-fracture of his leg. They fetched a stretcher presently, and bore him away in the dawn. He swore through it all, and refused to give his name or address. But future investigation proved his name to be Arthur Wright, of no occupation; and, as for his address, that will be Portland or Dartmoor until the end of this century. Seeing the nature of his vindictive threat touching myself and my cuckoo-clock, I can

only trust that there will be no lenience displayed. Given a ticket-of-leave, for instance, I am tolerably confident that Arthur Wright would seek the first train out here from town, and take the starch out of me and my cuckoo, just as he promised."

Here ends Tom Bird's narrative; and, as I come to its conclusion, the man himself rings at the door; but the unparalleled thing which has now befallen him, the sudden earthquake which has ruptured and split and shattered the peace and happiness of his home, demands more space than can here be devoted to it, and must, therefore, be reserved for another chapter.

CHAPTER XX.

The inventor—Steel jaws and spring guns—A moral man-trap—Which is set by the larder door—And catches a victim at the first time of asking.

BIRD, whose evening visit to me I have now to chronicle, came in as the clock struck nine, flung himself down in an easy-chair, dragged out his pipe and tobacco pouch, and began his gloomy recital at once.

“We shan’t be interrupted, old man, shall we?” he asked. “My story is a long one, and for your ear alone. The nature of it is painfully private, and confidential, too.”

I assured him no human ear but mine should listen to his narrative. My Laugher, of course, was perched in his usual position, just above Bird’s head; but the bronze could not be considered human, and therefore hardly counted.

“You know what a united household mine is, don’t you?” began Bird.

I told him the thing was a proverb, that

he and his wife were cited by the world as a pattern couple, and that his sons and daughters were universally held a model of what a family should be.

"Exactly," he answered; "I've understood that myself, but it's all over now. In the space of a week or two you will hear about the biggest scandal which has happened in this place since the curate's wife left him and her children, and disappeared with the sidesman. It will be a worse affair even than that. It will, in fact, be an unparalleled outrage."

"You alarm me," I said.

"I want to do so," he explained. "I want to work you up into a condition of thorough excitement. I want you to grasp the full misery of the thing that is coming upon me. Then it is just possible your ready wit may see and suggest a remedy. I cannot do so, try as I may."

"Come to the details," I said.

"They rise out of that recent attempted burglary at my place," began Bird. Then he smoked awhile in silence, as though arranging his thoughts, and, suddenly putting down his pipe, plunged into the story.

"I must tell you, for I shall hide nothing, that my wife and I, ever since the third

year of our married life, have differed upon one point, and one only. As you know, I consider Edison the greatest man who ever lived, and I am a bit of an inventor myself in a humble amateur way ; but this fatal gift has always been a source of annoyance to my wife. I have never understood why. She will take any amount of interest in my business, and knows the prices in my market"—Bird was on the Stock Exchange—"as well as I do, and even gives advice that I have often known come out right ; but when my hobby happens to be mentioned, she shows no interest at all, she doesn't care a straw about it, seems to think I'm wasting my time, and hints that the hours I spend in my workshop are all wasted. Just because I invented a mousetrap which was not successful, she thinks I have no gift in that direction ; and now, to shorten my story, I've gone and conclusively proved I understand inventing, and she refuses to forgive me. I've implored, like a cripple at a cross, but she is adamant. A separation seems the only thing left to me, and Heaven knows which of us will take the children."

"I gather, then, you have invented something really important this time, and that your wife does not approve of it ? "

"Exactly so," admitted Bird. "If Edison had brought out the thing I've just discovered, the papers would be full of it, and we should hear that he had made thousands by the patent."

"Surely your wife is a woman of business? Even though she doesn't like the invention herself, she won't think the worse of you for producing a marketable article, will she?" I asked.

"Theoretically, no; but the facts make an awkward tangle of the affair. The personal element enters into it very painfully. You will judge better after I tell you what has occurred. That recent frustrated burglary at my place set me thinking, and as sure as I get seriously reflecting about anything, so surely does an invention of some kind result from it. Nothing has ever yet been done to put a stop to the burglar nuisance. You can insure against them, and take precautions against them, but nobody has yet found an absolutely conclusive and certain preventive. I set myself to the task, and in less than two hours had solved the problem. My success was simply based on a knowledge of the law. Most people—yourself included, very likely—imagine that the man-trap, in any shape or form, is illegal. And so it is—excepting

indoors. You may not set such an engine in your game preserve, or in your garden, or even in your area; but, on the principle of an Englishman's house being his castle, it is legally allowed anybody to do what he likes in the matter of snares, gins, traps, or other engines upon his own premises. You may set a steel trap, or a spring-gun, even, inside your own front door if you choose to do so. The law allows it. You can find all about the matter in books. Well, there you are. When the head of a house goes round the last thing at night to see that the gas is turned out, and the windows and doors bolted, and the fires safe, and so on, all he has got to do is to just drag out his man-traps and plant them about everywhere, especially at the spots he knows to be weakest. In my case, the two vulnerable points are the larder and the drawing-room window. With those properly guarded my house is as strong as the Safe Deposit Company's vaults. I said to myself, 'All you want, Bird, is two man-traps. Set them every night, one outside the larder door, the other inside the drawing-room window, and you need never allow yourself another unquiet moment.' At this point my powers as an inventor came in. I'm an awfully humane chap, as you know,

and I didn't want to have another burglar get his leg broken in my house, so I put aside the idea of the ordinary, brutal man-traps with steel jaws and spikes. Of course, spring-guns were equally barbarous and out of the question. Besides, it was fifty to one that, if I arranged anything of that sort in the drawing-room, it would miss the burglar, and shoot a hole in the piano, or that oil-colour painting of my wife, or something else I valued. So I set to work to invent a man-trap which should neither kill nor maim ; which should even have a sort of moral significance, while at the same time, of course, it must achieve the main purpose of all man-traps, and hold any nefarious scoundrel tight until the time of his discovery."

At this point in his story, doubtless fired with the enthusiasm of the inventor, Bird cheered up, and grew brighter, and lighted his pipe again. But the brightness and the pipe both went out as he approached the climax of his narrative.

" Well, you'd guess such a machine as I wanted was not particularly easy to invent. In fact, though I say it myself, I don't believe any man alive, without a spark of the real Edison in him, would ever have hit on just the right idea ; but I did. It came, as all big

notions do come, like a lightning flash. My brain was empty one moment, full of the 'New Humane and Moral Man-trap' the next. The invention, and the name for it, entered my mind simultaneously. I was shaving at the time, but put down my razor, with the task half completed, and walked right away to my tool-shed, and began to draw the designs on the spur of the moment. Yesterday the thing was finished. This morning, my life is ruined. As you know, I dropped you a line, saying that I was in dire trouble, and should call to take your opinion upon a most awkward problem this evening."

He relapsed into deep gloom again, refused refreshment, and continued—

"First, I'll explain the invention itself. I cannot go into all the details and machinery, for that would take hours; but I will give you just the leading features, and the way it works, and the effect on the victim. I combine physical and moral force, as I told you. First, there's an indiarubber appliance in the style of a rat-trap—quite painless and merciful, but so designed that the devil himself couldn't get out of it if once caught. This is arranged to secure an adult just below the knee-joint, and in connection with it I have a cistern of cold water, which, when the

trap goes off, begins running like a shower-bath just over the burglar's head—of course, out of reach. With your gift of imagination you will easily conceive the effect of this on even the hardest and most depraved nature. But that is not all. When the concern goes off, a little mechanical contrivance liberates a hammer, which strikes a knob which lights an electric lamp of about two hundred candle-power. The rays from this fall upon a card which is arranged exactly in front of the victim's eyes; and on the card I have printed a couple of texts from Scripture. It was rather difficult to choose just the right quotations, but I think I have managed to do so. You will find that the Psalms simply teem with apposite reflections for housebreakers caught in the act, and some of the Minor Prophets appear to make direct allusions to them also.

"Well, last night I dragged the invention indoors, after everybody had gone to bed, and set it up in front of the larder, to see how it shaped there. I filled the cistern, and charged the electric battery, and hung up the texts and everything complete. I left the whole machine in position, and then returned to my workroom, where I was busy about other little final improvements on the 'New

Humane and Moral Man-Trap.' I worked late, and went to bed in a hurry, suddenly finding it was nearly two o'clock in the morning.

" You will understand that I left my engine down in front of the larder door. I sleep well as a rule, and that night slumbered even better than usual; but just before dawn, or just afterwards, I was awakened by screams of terror proceeding from the basement of my habitation. I started up, and my man-trap was the first thing that entered my head. Not stopping to do more than throw on a dressing-gown, I rushed downstairs, feeling that the most triumphant moment in my life had arrived. You guess the sequel, of course. Everything had worked splendidly; the water was pouring down out of the cistern in a torrent, the electric light was blazing—you could have read the Scriptural references a mile off—and in the middle of the apparatus, held fast by the leg, and looking about as wicked as they make 'em, was my wife."

" My dear Bird," I said, " I'm sorry for you."

" I was almost frightened to let her out," he continued. " If you've ever cornered a cat, and seen it turn all claws and teeth, with its back humped up and its tail like a flue



"The Moral Man-Trap catches a woman."



brush, then you may judge of my fix. She was too cross to speak; for that matter, I don't fancy she could have spoken, her teeth were chattering, and she was drenched to the skin. Not that that was far, for she had little on to speak of. I don't know whether she'd read the texts—I rather fancy not. They hadn't soothed her, anyway. I let her out, and she went away with only one remark. This was an allusion to an immediate separation. She has spent to-day getting information on the subject from her brother's solicitor."

"But what in the name of fortune was she doing down there at that hour?" I asked.

"Nothing happens but the unexpected," he answered. "The poor soul was hungry in the night, and went down to the larder to get a bit of bread-and-butter—a most unusual event. Now, what would you do? that's the question."

"Go home," I said, "and tell her frankly and humbly that you will never invent anything again as long as you live. It is a sacrifice for you; it is hard to hide up all your extraordinary light under a bushel, but you must choose between your inventions and your wife. That is the only course. If you solemnly promise to abandon the production

of new conceits, she will, I prophesy, forgive you instantly; if not, she will push for a separation."

"You don't think I might make rather a less complete surrender? The bargain you suggest is utterly one-sided, and I'm not sure if I'm justified in simply smothering gifts which must have been put into me for a good reason. What if I signed a document, and promised on my oath never to invent more than one thing every three months?"

"No half-measures will meet the case," I answered. "If you continue to develop this talent, you will shatter your home—that's quite clear."

So, with a sigh, he said he would make the sacrifice, and then returned to his family.

The Laugher told me afterwards that he considered my advice fairly sound; and I think it must have proved satisfactory, for Bird's household is still quite united, the man himself has taken to gardening, and was heard not long since to speak almost slightly of Mr. Edison.

CHAPTER XXI.

Concerning the amateur actor—Jasper Meredith—He explains his reading of “Hamlet”—His reasons for writing up the piece—And cutting it—His uncle's views.

“AMONG the many minor trials which lie in the paths of those whose business is concerned with the production of art appears the ‘amateur.’ Because you have more or less professional knowledge of painting or writing, or music or acting, those who occupy their leisure and dabble in these high matters regard you as their lawful prey.” I said this to the Laugher on a subsequent evening of our intercourse, and he, with his usual penetration, immediately foresaw the drift of the remark.

“I am to understand,” said he, “that you have lately suffered, or are about to suffer, from one of these same *dilettanti*? ”

“Both,” I replied. “I have already suffered at the public perpetration of an outrage

by the person in question and his myrmidons ; and to-night it pleases him to come here and fight his battle over again, and give me certain details and particulars redounding to his own credit. To paraphrase Ben Jonson, I would say—

‘Of all wild beasts, preserve me from a tyrant;
And of all tame—an amateur actor.’”

“ We had them in Greece,” said my Laugher. “ They proved a source of innocent merriment there. They never knew their parts, but they were wont to wear very splendid masks, and imitate the gestures and intonations of the great Thespian actors of that day.”

“ Just exactly what happens now,” I answered. “ Your amateur is the most ambitious person in the world. He aspires at a bound to results in pursuit of which professionals have grown grey-headed. His audacity is only equalled by his conceit, his self-confidence by his general incompetency. He will rush in where angels fear to tread ; he will tackle a classic with easy assurance. ‘ Seneca cannot be too heavy, nor Plautus too light.’ Nothing is beyond the amateur actor, and he never fails, if you will believe him. Now, to-night, one Jasper Meredith, of this suburb,

comes to talk with me. He will enter as a man having authority ; he will plunge into his recent enterprise at once ; he will explain the subtleties and new readings in his own performance of perhaps the most subtle character dramatist ever wrote for actor, and, if I venture to criticize at any point, he will either stare with ill-concealed contempt at my judgment, or else agree with me and explain how somebody else in the play was to blame."

"What has this man done ?" asked the Laugher.

"He has produced the play of *Hamlet* in our local Assembly Rooms. He has worked very hard and spent a good deal of money on the entertainment. He himself has played the 'Prince.' The girl to whom he is engaged undertook 'Ophelia,' and she proved an efficient undertaker too. His brother performed 'Horatio' ; his aunt appeared as the 'Queen' ; his father consented to maul the 'Ghost' ; his uncle prompted. It was a family affair, and the proceeds are to be handed over to a charity. This means that if the performance produces twenty pounds, the charity may very possibly be the gainer to the tune of seven and six-pence. The bulk of the money is spent on wigs and professional hirelings who 'make up' the actors and so forth ; while heavy

items are the programmes and advertisements, the hire of the public hall, the musicians, the dresses, and many other minor matters."

"What was this performance of *Hamlet* like?"

"Unique, in my experience. I never saw so many new readings in one production. But I'm old-fashioned. Here is Jasper Meredith himself. You will gather the significance of his achievement better from him than from me."

The new 'Hamlet' came in at this moment. He was clad in his evening wear of velveteen, and the effect of his recent efforts had not entirely passed off. He flung himself down in a studied attitude—the same which he had assumed before his great speech in the Third Act.

"You will be grieved to hear," he began abruptly, "that I have quarrelled with my brother Frederick. Henceforth there will be a life-feud between us."

"I'm sorry," I said; "but, honestly, I thought there were rather too many of your family playing in the piece. Was it at rehearsal?"

"It was on the night. During the supper we had afterwards, you know, Frederick, who played Horatio, got above himself altogether,

and insulted me in a way one cannot take even from a brother. I'll give you the facts, then you can judge. He said to me quite seriously, 'I particularly liked your imitation in the First Act, old man; it was life-like.' Well, as you doubtless observed, I followed Irving's reading pretty closely in the First Act. He goes astray afterwards—at least, I venture to think so; but his First Act is practically my own. So I said to Frederick, 'You mean that little bit like Irving, old chap?' And he answered, 'No, I refer to that long bit like a pump-handle, old man!' He absolutely said that. And, mind you, I *taught* him all he knows of acting! I only mention this because it will be all over the place that we have fallen out, and I want people to have the truth. Well, now, how did you enjoy yourself? I hear on every side that the audience was fairly carried away. In the first place, did you think the editing was judicious? I did that myself. I have my own ideas, and I cut the piece pretty freely. After all, 'Hamlet' is the part—eh? Some of the others are a bore, though it was Shakespeare who wrote them."

"Taken as a whole I thought it very creditable," I said.

Jasper looked uneasy.

"What d'you mean by 'creditable'?" he asked. "Surely the show as a whole deserves a rather stronger word than that?"

"Well, perhaps it does—as a whole," I admitted.

"Mind you, I want criticism. A many-sided part, like 'Hamlet,' cannot be performed as I performed it without raising a good deal of comment. Did I throw any light on your conception of the part?"

"You threw grave doubt on it," I explained. "You will take it as praise, of course, when I tell you that yours is the maddest Hamlet I have ever seen in my life."

"And the sanest? Don't you think so? My uncle thought so. Shouldn't you say that the sane passages were well marked?"

These I had not noticed. So I touched another point. I said—

"While it occurs to me, is it not a doubtful question of taste inserting those lines in the Third Act?"

"I'm surprised you noticed them," he answered. "Nobody else did. I wrote them in myself. It seemed to me the scene wanted them. The action is so involved without them. They ring true, though—you must admit that. My uncle said when he heard

them, ‘ Well, if Shakespeare didn’t write ’em, he might have.’ ”

“ You managed the scenery well,” I said.

“ I had a hand in that, too. I painted in a lot of archæological details at the last moment, and some of them came off on the Queen ; but nobody noticed it at the time. I’ve worked, I can tell you—worked properly. I hardly thought I should have strength left to get through the actual performance. Brown sherry, and plenty of it, was the only thing that kept me going. How did you like my ‘ make-up ’ ? My uncle says I looked exactly like Fechter.”

“ It was very effective. But why did you abandon the beard in the fifth act ? ”

“ Hamlet shaves in England. Those are the little touches I have put in all through. They are thrown away on an audience ; but an artist doesn’t care what people think. How did you take the new business with the skull ? ”

Jasper Meredith had drawn his sword, and picked up poor Yorick’s skull upon the point of it—like a turnip on a toasting-fork.

“ I never saw it done so before,” I said.

“ Probably not. The idea was my own. You see, Hamlet would not have touched a beastly skull with his hands ; he wasn’t the

man to do it. Even as it is, his gorge rises at it ; so I make him prod it gingerly with his rapier, and hold it at arm's length, then fling it from him in disgust. The local paper comes out to-morrow. I'll bet all these little artistic ideas will be missed by the critic. Not that I care. But if men like you appreciated me, I feel my trouble was not thrown away. Wasn't the First Grave-digger *wicked*? That's the sort of thing one has to put up with, just because he's the vicar's son. Miss Wilkins came out splendidly as 'Ophelia,' eh ? I can tell you, she moved me to tears once. I feel a part so keenly, you know. I should cry over that 'Get thee to a nunnery' business if I played the part a thousand times. Was I tender enough, d'you think ? Did I suggest a man torn in half by conflicting emotions ? "

" You suggested a man with creeping paralysis," I said.

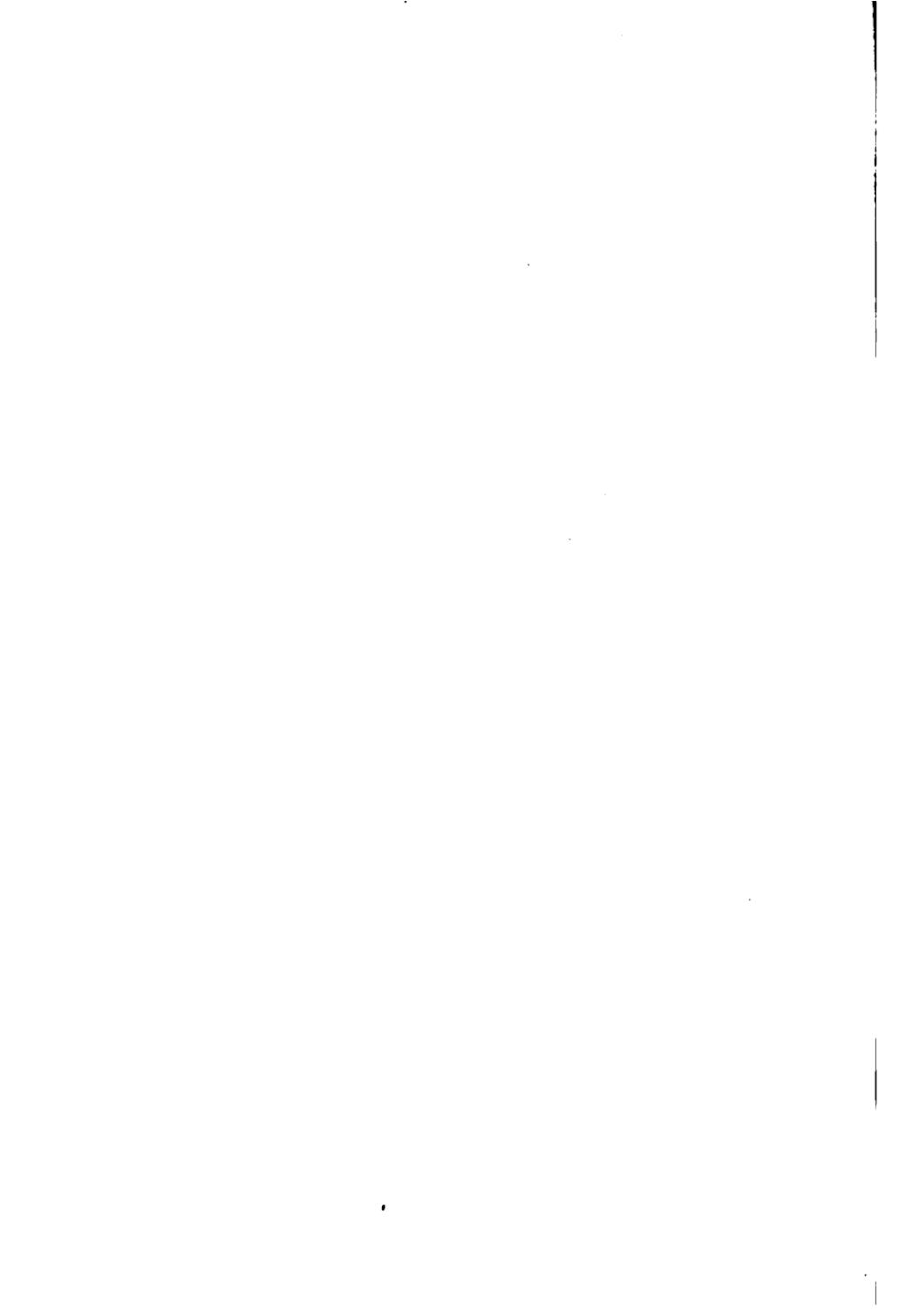
" What the deuce d'you mean ? " he asked sharply.

" Well, I thought that was your reading, candidly. Of course, it is open to question what particular kind of madness Hamlet suffered from."

He was silent for a short time, then changed the subject.



"A cat got on to the castle wall."



"How did the scene with the Ghost strike you? My uncle said it made him turn goose-flesh. But there might have been an awkward mishap there. Just as I'd uttered that about 'Revisit'st thus the glimpses of the moon,' a cat got up on to the castle ramparts, and began cleaning its face."

"I missed that," I said.

"Some of the band saw it, and laughed, but the scene was fortunately too dark for many people to notice. Did you think I was impressive? I'm told I was more impressive than the Ghost, really."

"I think so too. Without being personal, your father was not quite the right man for the Ghost."

"No, he wasn't; but, then, he wanted to do it so badly. He's got some old armour at home, and was most anxious to play the part in it. But, of course, a short, stout man can't really look easy in armour that was made for a tall, thin person. How they got the governor into the suit I don't know. He's quite knocked up to-day. But I'm glad you thought me impressive, because I know you're a critic, and well up in acting. Personally, though perhaps a man is not a judge of his own art, I felt raised to my highest pitch in the 'To be, or not to be' speech.

Thackeray, don't you know, after he'd written one of his big scenes, laid down his pen, and said, 'That's genius!' and I felt just the same when I'd finished. You could have heard a pin drop. And when Ophelia came in, did you notice how my manner suddenly changed?"

"Very suddenly."

"My uncle said he could hardly hold the book; and when I died at the end, my uncle tells me that the mayor and some of the swells in front cried. What was your own opinion of the death scene?"

As a matter of fact, I had not cared over-much for it. Perhaps the brown sherry had more to do with the effect than the "potent poison." The new Hamlet had died violently, chiefly on his head; and all the time he was perishing, he suggested, with more vigour than artistic propriety, that the venom had taken him in the pit of the stomach. So I said—

"It was a very consistent death—just the death your Hamlet might have been expected to die."

"It's very good of you to say so," he declared, and continued upon this point and that, upon this new reading and that, upon this original touch and that, for the space of

half an hour. Then he showed me where Irving and others were mistaken, and finally he asked me if I should care to see his reading again.

"We're giving the piece at the Lunatic Asylum next week. Acting is awfully good for lunatics; it soothes them, and calms them down, and brightens their lives generally. So we're doing it there. My brother has consented to play 'Horatio' in the interests of art, not from any feeling of friendship to me."

I explained that I should have to deny myself the second performance, and presently he started to go, running over a part of his recent reading in the hall, to show me some touches I had missed. When he was through with it, I saw him out, and bolted the front door.

The Laugher smiled upon my return to him; and when I asked the reason for his joy (being myself by this time in no smiling humour), he spoke—

"The spectacle of your friend soothing lunatics with his reading of 'Hamlet' is not devoid of entertainment. Perchance those in authority will not permit him to depart again upon the completion of his display."

CHAPTER XXII.

By the sounding sea—Peters—He joins a shrimp-tea—
Humours the young barbarians at play—And represents King Canute—He leaves the seaside a reformed character.

“THERE seems no sort of reason to doubt,” said the Laugher to me upon a future evening, “that your wife will have her way about a summer holiday. She says little at a time, but she alludes to the subject often, and there is that in her manner which leaves a certainty in my mind that she designs to gain her object.”

“She will, without question,” I admitted. “She knows that, as surely as the month of August comes, we shall repair to the seaside as usual. I only grumble and question the wisdom of the step from force of habit. Men always protest as sure as the season comes round, but they generally end by creeping off in two flies, as usual. Between ourselves, I would not myself miss going to the yellow

sands on any account. When I put on my 'blazer' and straw hat and canvas shoes I throw off twenty years or more. Candidly, you would not know me at the seaside. Once I met a friend at our holiday resort—a man whom I had not seen for a decade. I was eating green pears out of a bag at the time, and carrying a little wooden spade and bucket—not my own, of course, but the property of the daughter of the house. I said—

"‘Peters, dear old chap, “how does your honour this many a day”? Have a pear?’

“And Peters—a staid man, connected by profession with the science of engineering—though he recognized me, evidently did so with some sorrow and alarm. I could see him looking over my shoulder for a keeper, and I read his thought.

“‘It isn’t that,’ I said. ‘I’m married, and we are having holidays—all of us.’

“Then he came forward and shook hands and showed pleasure.

“‘I shouldn’t have expected to see *you* here,’ I said.

“He was evidently glad to hear that, and explained the reason for his presence.

“‘I’m only here professionally in connection with Local Board improvements. Er—don’t

let me keep you now, old fellow, if that's your party.' He was a bachelor, and an ignorant man in some ways, for, as he spoke, he pointed to a ladies' school now approaching us. I humoured him.

"‘Yes,’ I said, ‘that’s part of my little home circle. Come and have tea with us upon the beach. The boys are on ahead getting things ready. They’ll be glad to have another man to bully. Shrimps and cake, my boy, and plenty of them. Then hunt-the-slipper, and paddling, and so forth. What you want is exercise. I’d give a sovereign to see you building a sand-castle, and getting rapped over the head with a wooden spade. It ages some men, but it would do you good. You ought not to wear a silk hat by the sea, but it’s an ill wind that blows nobody any good: the thing will make excellent sand pies. What you want is half a-pound of gravel down your neck; and my youngest but one is the very man to manage it for you. You’ll soon catch the spirit of a tea-party on the sands; and even if you don’t, it doesn’t matter. You can leave us before we begin to play Red Indians. So come along and yield yourself up to the pleasure of the hour.’

“Poor old Peters! His natural good breeding induced him to decline pleasantly, and in

a friendly spirit, but the horror of the programme made his voice unsteady. He smiled and looked down at his exquisite little French boots, and pictured the tails of his perfect frock coat a prey to the spade and bucket of the young.

“‘ You’re quite a family man now, I see. And you appear to enjoy high spirits, too, which you didn’t ten years ago. I am tremendously glad to see you again, and not grown a day older. At another time I should immensely enjoy your—er—hospitality, and a talk over our mutual friends. I need not say, either, how I should value the privilege of your wife’s acquaintance. But your party is made up; I’m sure it is large enough, and I should damp the youngsters—eh?’

“‘ You wouldn’t damp them half as much as they might you,’ I said. ‘ They throw me into the sea half a dozen times a day, and think nothing of it. Salt water does no harm.’

“‘ Positively I cannot. You won’t think it rude?’

“‘ Not merely rude,’ I answered, ‘ but brutal. Here, we haven’t met for ten years. You have nothing to do till to-morrow. I know it, or you wouldn’t be on this pier taking the air. Don’t hesitate; you need not

eat shrimps, or participate in the festivities more than you like. You want taking out of yourself; you always did. I'm sorry you're not married; but, of course, that's your business. Then you'll come, eh ?'

" He looked at the vanishing ladies' school, and shook his head.

" 'I should ruin your party,' he faltered. 'Don't ask me, old friend. The entertainment isn't in my line.'

" I fancied he was yielding a little, and pressed the point.

" 'We are not so numerous as you imagine. You will only bring the total to seven. Those blooming maidens who passed just now don't belong to me. We shall go by our diggings on the way to the banquet, and I will lend you a coat and hat, and anything else your like. Let me beg of you to come.'

" 'But why should I rush in upon the sanctity of a family shrimp tea? Your wife will resent it; your children—'

" He had hesitated, and was accordingly lost. I dragged him off, made him change his frock coat and top hat, and led him forth smiling, but self-conscious, to the party. He said nervously, as we approached the young barbarians at play—

“‘Look here, old man, I’ll throw myself into their pastimes with such zest as I can command, and, in fact, do anything in reason; but—but pardon me if I ask you not to let your youngest boy but one put sand and things down my neck. It might be fun to him, but would be death to me; and there are plenty of other ways in which I can oblige him.’

“‘Rest easy,’ I said; ‘albeit, a youth of pertinacious sort, it is possible to cope with him. You and I together might reasonably hope to frustrate him.’

“Well, Peters was greeted with friendship, treated to a sand armchair with newspaper cushions, and made one of us. His discomfort gradually wore off; he took a second cup of tea, helped to kill a wasp, and asked a couple of riddles. Then he offered to design a sand castle on scientific principles if we would build it. The castle proved entirely successful, and, as a reward, Peters was invited to join in more manly sports. We paddled and ran races, and finally, as the tide was now coming in, my family prepared for an extremely favourite pastime. We were wont to enact the historic tableau of Canute and his courtiers at least twice a day, and I generally represented the monarch; but this

afternoon I found myself deposed, for a deputation waited on Peters and invited him to be king.

"Your king? Certainly," said my old friend, beaming at his court. "But what's the game?"

"It's a history game. We make a throne out of sand and stones, and you sit on it, and then the tide comes in, and we stuff you up that you're such a wonderful sort of king that even the waves won't touch you if you tell them not to."

"Then another took up the theme.

"After that you pretend to believe us, and you say to the sea not to come near your throne or your shoes. And we's the courtiers, and we say, "King Canute's a wonnerful man!"'

"Yes," said Peter's, "that sounds simple enough. Then what?"

"Den pesently a wave tomes, an' you det wet froo, an' we roars," said my youngest but one.

Despite this programme, Peters was wound up to such a pitch that he agreed to reign. They enthroned him, therefore, and he rebuked the rising tide, and sat on facing the flood, till the courtiers danced in an ecstasy of delight, and implored him to reign

over them as long as they were away from home. Sufficiently wet, but in splendid spirits, Peters promised, at any rate, to see more of his court before it should leave the seaside. I was astounded at the way he came out ; and my wife made him blush on the homeward way by saying it was easy enough to see he must have a family of his own.

“ ‘I do love to see a grown man fond of children,’ she said. ‘In the future, you know, our little people will have to turn to their fathers when they want pleasure, because the New Woman is only going to do the spanking and correction. As soon as her babies bawl, she will go off to her club, and leave her husband to soothe them.’

“ We reached home anon, and when his court had retired for the night, Peters stopped on and talked of old times, and had some whisky and a cigar. But his mind ran more on the present than the future. His heart, bless him, had gone out to my unruly infants. He assured me more than once that he had rarely felt so taken out of himself, or enjoyed a pleasanter evening’s amusement. He even reverted to the shrimps. He confessed he had never eaten a shrimp before that afternoon, or played on the sands, or paddled, or represented King Canute. Ultimately, he

rose, rather stiff, but still cheerful. He put on his frock-coat with reluctance, his top-hat with an approach to impatience. And the next day he met us all on the pier, clad in yellow boots and a round coat. The man was reformed in the twinkling of an eye. My brood clustered round him with rejoicings, and their King acted in a manner truly regal, by half-emptying an automatic chocolate apparatus solely that his court should have a refreshment that was dear to it. We saw much of Peters afterwards, and when, three days later, having completed his business, he departed, it was a mournful procession that fought for his portmanteau, and escorted him sorrowfully to the station. Two olive branches had the privilege of holding their monarch's hands to the very door of the carriage, and when the cruel train bore his kind, soft-hearted friend away from him, my youngest but one lifted up his voice and wept; and his elders were affected, too, but bore their loss with more Spartan control.

"It was always Mr. Peters after that. My rendering of Canute appeared a feeble thing beside his; my jokes were not so good, my faces not so funny, and my pocket not so deep. But they tolerated me, I admit, though of course the charm of novelty had

long worn off me, and I was but a sorry substitute.

"I did not lose sight of Peters again. We see much of one another, and our wives are on intimate terms."

"You said he was a bachelor," interrupted the Laugher sternly.

"True. He was—in the past. We all are at some wretched, early period of our lives. Husbands are made, not born. But Peters was a reformed man from the moment of that shrimp tea. I glory to this day in the fact that it was I and my home-circle who opened his eyes to what he was allowing to slip from him. It is well to allow another man's children to get happiness out of you, and pull you to pieces, and empty your pocket now and then; but how infinitely better to have children of your own to do it!"

"I should think you were easily pleased," said my bronze.

"Possibly. At any rate, Peters married a year after that particular occasion. And now he has two boys and a girl. The babes are not yet old enough to make him play King Canute, and he fears that by the time they are, his rheumatism will have rendered the sport impossible. But I always tell him salt water never hurts anybody. On

another occasion I will relate to you further doings by the ocean wave, if you care to hear them."

"I am in your power," answered the Laugher. "I doubt not you will continue to tell me what you please."

CHAPTER XXIII.

Truth—The Laugher bursts forth into an allegory—He describes the rise and fall of a notable lie—But refuses to give it a name—The hair-splitter.

“I AM concerned,” said my Laugher an evening or two later, “with the subject of Truth. Men have been striving after Truth now for some thousands of years, and yet I observe no practical results from an ethical point of view. I, as you will understand from my position in the world, have been able to mark the divers phases of human thought to some extent, and their bearing on society. I have seen creeds wax and wane, opinions change with the spread of knowledge, one age’s sacred treasures and most cherished beliefs the laughing-stocks of the next; and yet a remarkable fact faces me to-day. The more complex grows human society, the loftier rise the pinnacles to which civilization ascends; the more cultured are our relations and refined our social scheme of things, so much the more do we find one

all-prevalent support. Society is buttressed and propped with Falsehood on every side."

"The increasing complications of society breed an unfortunate necessity for untruth in trifles," I explained.

"In other words, Falsehood is the cornerstone of the social edifice. You, yourself, tell fifty lies a day—sometimes more. So does your wife. You cannot help yourselves. If you started telling the truth consistently you would not have a friend in the world in a month. Not even your clergyman. He would applaud you theoretically; but as soon as you had told him the truth about his preaching and his method of elocution, he would go over to the enemy. Man cannot stand the truth in his relations with his fellow-men. Society is honeycombed and rotten. It breeds lies like a dead dog maggots. And it gets worse every century. I see round me some of the same lies I saw in Egypt, and many new ones. A few are dead; but cultured society, then as now, depended on perversion of truth for its existence. Some of the old lies have grown into giants, some shadow the world. But I remember many an important lie as a mere infant in arms. I have seen them fresh from the brain of the inventor when they could scarce stand alone. Some die untimely through

exposure to the sudden breath of Truth. A young lie should be kept in the hot-house till it can crawl alone. Then, if it have vitality, it will make its way in the world, get a grip of men's minds, and grow important. Not that the culture of the lie is at any time difficult. A strong young lie prospers anywhere, and breeds freely, too, on any language-speaking tongues: it is Truth that needs such careful attention if it is to flourish and propagate. The genesis of the common lie is often interesting. I could give you the family history and adventures of a hundred. Your lie has exciting times and hair-breadth escapes in his youth, but when he has weathered a generation or two, and becomes part of a people's thought, he grows strong, and turns the tables on his foes. As one of your wise men has said, 'people prefer a prosperous Falsehood before an afflicted Truth.' Listen, and you shall hear the story of a great, notable lie. I will narrate to you his mean birth, his rise and ultimate fall, but his name I shall not tell you. You may call him by what name you think fit. Here, at any rate, is the story of him set forth as in an allegory—

"Once on a time two men, to gain their own ends, gave out that Black was White. It seemed a neat lie, complete in itself, and

capable of perfect logical demonstration, as most lies are. At first people rejected the innovation ; but never a lie was told yet that somebody did not swallow, and the lie, being convenient and calculated to help a considerable class in the business of life, was accepted by a certain school. Conservatives would not budge, of course ; but the 'Black is White School' laughed at the rest of the old-fashioned world, and increased its numbers. Conferences sat on the subject, and the finest intellects of the time occupied themselves with it. The 'Black is Black and White is White' folks asked, very pertinently, 'If Black is White, what is White ?' and the other party answered triumphantly, 'If Black is White, as we know it is, then White is Black.' The lie began to grow prosperous, for the old generation died out, and the younger people all leant towards the new view. The former belief was first regarded with contempt, then with indignation, and finally there came to the throne of that kingdom a 'Black is White' monarch, who held such decided views on the importance of the doctrine, that he made the old heathen notion that 'Black is Black' an offence against the law of the land. A few weak souls, spurred thereto by a love of notoriety, proclaimed

upon the housetops that Black was Black ; but they were immediately arrested and beheaded for their pains. And then came that Grand Lie's greatest season of prosperity. It flourished throughout the length and breadth of the land ; the two men who originally invented it were carved in marble and set on pedestals ; while earnest missionaries, feeling the welfare of the world depended on a more extended knowledge that Black was White, went out into infidel countries with the Grand Lie on their lips, and told the news north and south, and east and west. Here and there the value of the new philosophy appealed to the minds of those who had lived in ignorance. The people who had believed that Black was Blue gladly accepted the Grand Lie, but the people who held that Black was Red would have nothing to do with it, and the benighted nations that still clung to the primitive fallacy that Black was Black similarly refused the Lie entertainment. And the missionaries who brought it hither were fried on hot bricks and boiled, and torn to pieces, and painfully deprived of life ; but they died happy in the great cause of the Grand Lie, and their countrymen were proud of them. Then, in that Kingdom, there rose a man of vast mental activity—a man cursed

with an astounding measure of reason, but possessed of scant faith. The questions of the hour he tackled fearlessly, among others the 'Black is White' dogma. One or two people shivered when he said he was examining this problem. Some told him he would lose his head for it, and serve him right; others asked him how he dared to examine the credentials of an Eternal Verity. That was the name the Grand Lie went by now. It was magnified to a position as important and beyond question as that of the sun or the stars. In my experience I find the time necessary for a Grand Lie to become an Eternal Verity is generally about five hundred years. Well, the man blundered on, and arrived at some curious facts. He discovered that the prosperity of his nation now depended on the 'Black is White' dogma, that only by supporting it in the face of opposition and enforcing it in the teeth of the world, could the country much longer hope for any prosperity at all. To refute the deception, therefore, would really amount to an act of treason against his mother land. But the man had a theory that Truth was the only foundation upon which a State's lasting welfare could be based, and he determined to strike at the Grand Lie. He

knew that he would lose his life, for the fall of any grand lie is a destructive matter, and much must be sacrificed in the ruin ; but he wanted to sow the seed of Reason in the minds of his fellow-men, and he attacked the enemy in a very subtle fashion. He started a school to revive ancient branches of knowledge, and among other venerable beliefs and superstitions he examined the old-world philosophy of those who had gone through life declaring that Black was Black. He had a fascinating way of teaching, and, without saying so in as many words, he yet made his pupils see where his own sympathies lay. So in time the youngsters went into the world and asserted here and there—in the home circle, on the mart, upon the sea, and elsewhere—that there existed strong arguments for the old theory that Black was Black, and not White. People wondered how this poison had crept into the nation, and set about stamping the horrid thing out. It was traced to the teacher of the school, and some ‘Black is White’ philosophers came in a body where he taught and knocked him on the head, and scattered his establishment, and burned his widow and orphans. That was well, but the harm had been done. There were in the kingdom at least a hundred young men who

secretly cherished the baleful theory, and though they did not raise a noise about it, desiring to keep whole skins, they made no effort to instil proper principles into the rising generation. So the dusky, unbeautiful worm of Reason gnawed at the root of the Grand Lie. It began to grow a little out of date. Bold periodicals poked fun at it, society risked its head; advanced women sneered at it openly; in Court circles it was known that the thing had lost its force. Then the laws relating to it became abrogated, for they were now regarded as a slur on the intelligence of the nation, and old men shook their heads and trembled for a kingdom that was openly and notoriously doubting whether Black was in reality White. Finally, the Grand Lie came down with an awful crash, like a forest tree in time of tempest. Desolation hardly describes the result. The wreck was complete, and thousands of little lies that had flourished quietly and comfortably under the shadow of the Grand Lie were scorched up and destroyed, for now the Sun got to work on all that fungus of falsehood and network of fallacy which had flourished in the dense shadow. Hundreds perished in the pestilence caused by so much decay, or, to drop the simile, civil war devastated the fair land, and

the believers that Black was White gave their lives for the dead conviction. But they could not bring it to life again. Meantime the New Party went to extremes in their zeal. They knocked down and ground to powder the statues of the ancient worthies who had first held that Black was White ; they raised temples to the fanatics who had maintained that Black was Black, and called a Province after him who taught the youth of the nation that truth, and was, therefore, responsible for the revolt. The King himself publicly accepted the position, and proclaimed that Black was Black henceforth and for ever. He went further, and ordered a week's holiday for everybody—a Carnival of pure Reason—during which all men were to put on Black, and all women White, and anybody mistaking Black for White until after ten o'clock in the evening, when the error was natural, would be expected to pay into the Royal coffers such sum exceeding ten per cent. on his capital as his means could bear."

"And what of that Kingdom to-day?" I inquired, when the Laugher had completed his narrative of the Grand Lie.

"I have heard of it," he replied ; "and I am told there is an inclination to go back to the old philosophy. The place is a Republic

now, and the more advanced lean towards the resuscitation of the Grand Lie. There is a noted hair-splitter risen there, and he can prove by the paradox anything he will. He has, for instance, made it clear that the moon is composed of green cheese, and the nations accept that statement. He has, furthermore, exploded the old fallacy that chalk and cheese have any fundamental points of difference; and, having once more grasped this fact, that chalk and cheese are the same thing, it needs no hero of science to see that the moon, if a cheese moon, is also a chalk moon. Once prove a chalk moon, and much follows. Thus, chalk argues life of a low order, and life of a low order argues evolution, and life of a high order. From that chalky starting-point the hair-splitter obtained grand and practical results. He proved that the other side of the moon must still be inhabited by a very high order of being—a creature superior to any human being that has ever existed. He learned several interesting facts concerning this creature, and found, after some wonderful mathematical calculations, that, in the land on the other side of the moon, twice two were not considered to be four at all, but six. Once allow that twice two are six, and you get exciting results. Thus, when that hair-splitter

announced that twice two were six, half the nation wanted to put him in a lunatic asylum, and the other half wished to make him President, but he solved the difficulty by proving——”

Here the clock struck one, and my Laugher had to stop. Honestly, I was rather glad. We were leaving our theme entirely. To return to the starting-point, my own opinion is that language is responsible for the leaven of untruth which runs through life and manners nowadays. Language, always plastic, lends itself to this state of things. The direct “yes” and positive “no” are rare. A general vagueness and fading off into indefinite haze characterizes conversation. Present interchange of ideas, like the law, is the science of finding or leaving loopholes. Knowledge increases, and our vocabularies increase with it. But huge vocabularies, full of the ghosts of languages that are dead, appear absolutely fatal to plain speaking. Take De Quincey, or Coleridge, or Gladstone. These giants lack the power to say “yes” or “no.” But, conversely, the smaller a man’s control of language, and the more limited his vehicle of expression, the harder he finds it to hide his real opinions, or lie artistically and intelligently. A long vocabulary wastes more

valuable moments than anything on earth, and prevarication is a thief of time second to none. That, at least, is my experience after lengthy intercourse with all sorts and conditions of business men.

CHAPTER XXIV.

At a music-hall—"Serio-comics"—The ballet—On dancing—The giant—The juggler—Acrobats—A comic song examined.

THE Laugher invited me to give him some information an evening or two later.

"I should like," he said, "to know something of the amusements of the masses. You tell me that art is the pleasure of the more cultured, that they find entertainment in pictures and music, or in books and theatrical representations dealing with the problems called social and the relations of the sexes. Such matters as these last, doubtless, have an interest for the classes who have time to think of them, or the unfortunate folk whose high rank obliges them to marry for convenience; but where do the herd find their amusement—the mere mass of workers who trouble not about social problems?"

"They like sport, and laughter, and tears," I said. "In matters dramatic they lean to

sensation, but resent half-tones. Their sense of humour is not as ours. You would suck small delight from their favourite entertainment of all—that represented by an evening at a music-hall. They prefer such pastime, because they can smoke and drink and talk throughout the performance. I went to a popular music-hall some few nights ago with a friend for the same reason. The place was crammed. Lend me your ear, and I will sketch the programme. When we arrived, a stout, elderly woman, painted white and red, was singing something about the 'Husband's Boat' to Margate. She, it appeared, travelled by it habitually, and, upon her own showing, conducted herself without refinement when on board. She tried to make the gallery help her with the chorus, but they were not enthusiastic, and only a few inexperienced people applauded when the person withdrew. The programme informed us that she was a serio-comic vocalist. Her ditty analyzed suggested various problems, but it need not be considered, because the audience cared nothing for it. Next came a man dressed in an old frock-coat and white trousers, and flourishing a hat without any crown. He received an ovation, and people settled down smilingly

beforehand to listen to him. His fun consisted of verbal quips, and the recital of adventures concerning a mother-in-law. He handled social problems freely, and said some things it would not be possible to print in a book or journal. His humour was genuine, his vulgarity was extreme. My pipe went out while I listened, and I laughed boisterously. Mark you, I ought not to have laughed. The fun was broad and homely to the verge of offence, there was not a shadow of advantage to be gained from hearing and seeing the man, but still I laughed, and felt kindly towards him. Now, what was I laughing at? Not at the comic man's exterior, not at his words or songs, or extravagant gestures. I was laughing, I think, because I had enjoyed a good dinner, and was smoking a good cigar, and in the company of a great friend. I was ready to find fun. It may have been that. Had you been there you would have laughed too—not at the performer, but at the audience. With your views, the spectacle of five hundred human beings laughing at that noisy fellow would have been exquisitely comic. After the 'eccentric comedian' had departed, we saw a lady who could touch the back of her head with the soles of her feet, and occupy

numerous positions not intended by Providence for a human being. To do these things she had endured great tortures when young, and defied Nature and broken-down muscles, and generally suffered maltreatment. Now she delights thousands by her achievements, and is a ‘star,’ a ‘boneless wonder,’ a ‘human spider,’ or what you will. Next, a man imitated noises and music. He burlesqued the songs of birds, and the audience, never having heard any of the originals, clapped loudly to show they knew how good he was. Then he did two dogs fighting, and cats differing, and a man sawing wood, and the sound of a hammer on an anvil. This display merely served to illustrate the astounding capabilities of the vocal chord. It also enabled the man to live. Then we had a ballet—a truly glorious spectacle, full of rainbow splendours. A fine ballet is a feast to the eye every way. There you have the charm of rhythmic movement, the beauty of five hundred human figures in simultaneous action to music. That spectacle is voted cheap and tawdry, mind you, by thousands of the cultured. They sneer at a great ballet, being either not educated up to it, or else educated beyond it. To me, who pretend to no æsthetic tastes, but hesitate not to say what

I like and what I dislike, a ballet is an invigorating concern, and gives me not only sensuous pleasure of varied kind for eye and ear, but intellectual entertainment also. This appears when I set myself to cope with the plot of a ballet. They invariably have a plot as an excuse for their existence. There are fiends and fairies in them, and a hero and a heroine, and a bold, bad man, and a funny person, and so forth. Those skilled in the technical significance of pantomimic action know the meaning of every gesture, and to them all is clear. Thus the characters stroke their chins, press their hearts, stamp their feet, pass their hands over their foreheads, point here and there, to heaven and earth, and perform many varied tricks. These all have a special value. Lord Burleigh's nod was not more important or pregnant of things hidden than these pantomimic actions. They tell of love and hate and hunger; of despair, determination, success, and defeat. The modern triumphs of dancing, however, do not over-much appeal to me. Where nature is defied beauty dies. The gymnastic exercises of the queens of ballet have their admirers. The Italian school, in fact, takes first place. But beauty is sacrificed in my humble opinion. There is nothing beautiful in stiff gauze skirts which

stick out at right angles from the waist they surround ; there is nothing beautiful in a leg whereon muscle is abnormally developed ; or in a foot, the instep of which is broken down. To trip along on the tips of the toes with the calves bulging out is very difficult, and the feat takes years to learn. It is held a necessary accomplishment, and has therefore to be acquired. Similarly the violent spinning of a human being provokes applause, but there is no art, or beauty, or grace about a spinning woman ; while the male dancers' principal feats are also of a spinning character, and interest me only as an acrobat does. After the ballet we saw a giant. He was eight feet high, or more, and growing fast. The people applauded him. Poor devil ! one might have travelled far and not seen a sadder sight. Death was written on his face, his feeble knees knocked together ; he looked out of weary, unhappy eyes as big as an ox's. Some of us shook hands with him, and he smiled down at us. He was nineteen years old, and making about fifty pounds a week. Nature in her cruel moments is terrible. The monster which Frankenstein built of horrid fragments, and caused to live, was not more lonely than this aborted wreck of a man over eight feet high. But he lived

in an atmosphere of cheers and clapping hands, if that is anything.

"After the giant had taken his bones behind the curtain, a man did tricks with knives and potatoes, and billiard balls and cigars. His skill was astounding. One might have supposed the laws of gravitation were suspended during his performance. Behind his feats, each more astonishing than the last, one saw a world of patience and self-control. Early and late that man must have practised, and with iron will surmounted the difficulties he set himself to conquer. Hand, eye, brain worked magically together. He was, folks said, the greatest juggler or equilibrist who had ever lived. That man possessed powers stamping him for distinction. Had he been born to a sphere outside the circus it is conceivable his rare gifts had been turned to loftier channels. But he loved his art—I could see that. The applause of the mob gave him no greater pleasure than that of his own conscience when he accomplished a task which, set on paper, would sound miraculous. And here I may note that many of these public entertainers, whose performances depend on strict self-denial, and conquest over the human tabernacle, show fine qualities. Their triumphs are

hardly purchased ; their pluck, and courage, and iron nerve, applied in loftier channels, might bring to not a few of them fame more lasting than that of the music-hall. Some acrobats illustrated this. One small boy—English, I hope, but cannot say with certainty—was called upon to fling somersaults from the shoulders of one man, and pitch upon his feet on the neck of another. I believe the trick is no great one, but a baby—he was scarcely more—must have deemed it a considerable achievement. Thrice he failed, then rested awhile, chalked his little feet, and went at it again. Finally the child succeeded. I think the trick had not been before attempted by him in public, for his fellows on the stage applauded him, and he felt himself a great man.

“ These, then, are some of the sights of a music-hall. We had many serio-comic ladies and gentlemen afterwards, but their entertainments were all conducted on similar fatuous lines. I will, in conclusion, describe a comic song, that you may gather the nature of the thing as it appears in these places of public amusement. A man entered more extravagantly attired than any of his fellows. He had a bald wig, with a little sailor-hat perched upon it, a false nose, a

grotesquely painted face, and a big dog-collar round his neck. He was further attired in a short black jacket of the kind called 'Eton,' and, below this, he wore a pair of bathing-drawers and black fleshings. On his feet were long sand-shoes with wooden soles. The man was a great favourite. He talked familiarly to the audience and the conductor of the orchestra. Then he sang. Now, the music-hall song is usually concerned with disasters to the singer or his friends. It narrates imaginary incidents contrary to law and order; it has a catchy chorus; it depends not at all on rhyme; the construction admits of gravest criticism, if one felt inclined so to waste time. The thing also generally contains some short phrase capable of many sudden unexpected applications. This is worked into each verse, and comic significance is given to it, sometimes by sly allusion, sometimes by the torturing of the phrase itself. Herein lies the humour. Each verse leads to the climax as represented by the catch phrase. I will jot down for you a verse or two which I have written as a pattern. My verse includes every error of taste you shall find in the real thing, together with the faulty rhymes and general offensive tone. It is neither better nor worse than the songs

I heard sung by that man in the Eton jacket. If he were to sing it one night, set to the sort of tune that is popular, he would be applauded, and the song might give pleasure to a great number of people. Of course, his cockney accent would add charm. This I can only partially convey to you in print."

Then I read to him an imitation of the song loved by the masses—

"WHAT'S THE ODDS ?

I.

"I was walkin' darn the street
 In a neighbour'ood what's quiet,
 Not very far from 'Ammersmif Broadwyi,
 When some coves jumped out a sudden
 An' they mikes an norful riot,
 An' they clumps me on the nose an' on the eye.
 I shouted, yus, I shouted,
 For I was gettin' routed,
 I called for a policeman loud and long,
 Till them 'orrible gerotters
 Just took to their trotters,
 Of course no bobby never come along.
 But he'd passed, oh, yus, he'd passed—
 He'd passed that wiy about two years agow.

I shouted art in vine,
 He won't come by agine,

And I'd lost my watch and chine alsow.

(Chorus) What's the hoddso so long as you're rappy ?

What's the hoddso so long as you're giy ?
 I'm a rollickin' sort of a chappie,
 And each bloomin' dog must 'ave his diy.'

" You see," I explained, " the nature of the thing. If you examine the rhymes and the construction, you will learn much. The police are satirized, you observe. Now listen to the next verse—

II.

" I once possessed a coin,
From the Mint 'e never come,
Though 'sov'reign' was the nime upon his fice,
'E was mide of common brass,
And I didn't want the sum,
So I tried to spend that 'sov' withart disgrice.
I tried the shops 'ard by,
But they was much too fly,
An' public 'ouses, too, of every kind;
Until at last I meets
At the corner of two streets
An old man selling matches as was blind,
And it passed, oh yus, it passed,
'E give me all his stock and tride, 'e did;
Bootlices, buttons, too,
S'elp me never, but it's true,
And all just for a 'ankey-pankey quid.
(*Chorus as before.*)'

" Here," I explained, " the fun consists in getting rid of a false coin on a blind beggar. The singer who confesses to most outrages on humanity of this kind always wins the greatest applause. In the next verse the drink question is dealt with. I have only

written three verses, and felt much demoralized upon the completion of the third.

III.

“ ‘ When you ‘ave a thirsty time,
An’ you start upon the ‘whack,’
You will look upon the wine when it is red,
An’ the beer when it is amber,
An’ the porter when it’s black,
An’ the whisky when it’s got into your ‘ead.
If you puts away too much
The results is horfen such
That you’ll find pink snikes a-buzzin’ rarnd the door ;
If they sets your teef on edge,
Jus’ you go an’ tike the Pledge,
An’ keep it for a week or, may be, more.
Then they’ll pass, oh yus, they’ll pass,
They’ll pass awiy an’ leave you right as rine ;
The blue and the vermillion,
If there’s a thousand million —
But they’ll come when you are on the booze agine.
(*Chorus as in previous cases.*) ’

“ There, you see, we have advice to the hard drinker, and an object lesson. When ‘pink snikes’ appear it is time to take the pledge—temporarily, at any rate. In this verse we have jesting allusions to drunkenness and *delirium tremens*. The man who sang that drivel really well and funnily would very possibly be encored, and have to give the audience another verse. But I am, I imagine,

correct in assuming you would not care about an 'encore' verse?"

"Quite," answered the Laugher. "Having read this deplorable effusion, let me beg of you to tear it up in small fragments, and put it into the waste-paper basket. It would not be well that any of your family should see it and learn the secret of its authorship. Neither should the girl you call Jane be allowed opportunity to study it."

"She would think my work was improving fast if she saw it," I said.

CHAPTER XXV.

Life on my garden wall—The tiger-spider and the daddy
—Cold comfort—The grizzly-bear spider—I give a
lecture—“A Fairy Song.”

“I PROMISED to give you another transcript from Nature some time ago,” I said to my Laugher. “To-night I am fresh come from watching the life of small people upon my garden wall. They fight for existence among themselves, and only the fittest survive, as you would expect. There are tragedies and farces there, loves and wars, births and deaths — in fact, the whole entomological comedy may be witnessed on a square foot of old brickwork, with many holes and crannies between the bricks. As you are aware, I have grasped the cryptic languages of these folks. They keep no secrets from me, because they know I never interfere with their private concerns, or chase them, or smash them, and I never take sides. I am absolutely impartial ; in fact, foolishly so. Thus, in the

matter of green-fly and wood-lice, and other busy small fry, I stand in my own light, for these races, speaking botanically, are pests. Once I used to kill them in large numbers ; now I let them live, and am the loser by a few roses and a few nectarines, no doubt, but the gainer in certain information worth possessing. A wood-louse, in his polished plates of armour, shares with God Almighty secrets denied to man. A green-fly, I admit, doesn't know much, but he is a good listener, and will often say a wise thing ; in fact, I should be disposed to think of a green-fly that he looks a greater fool than he is."

Here I stopped to light my pipe, and the Laugher said he would listen to me on one condition — that I kept silence upon the following evening while he spoke a piece. To this I agreed willingly, and then proceeded—

"On my garden wall, and the foliage which lies against it, you shall find, perhaps, five different kinds of spiders, together with snails, wood-lice, lady-birds, earwigs, blue-bottles, ants, midges, and small flies of every sort. Concerning the spiders, I might say much. They are the big game of my preserve, and their awful ferocity and powers of digestion are such that a Bengal tiger is a

mere tame cat in temper and appetite compared with them, allowing for difference of size. I have tiger-spiders myself; they spin no web, but stalk their prey, and leap from brick to brick—a full inch at a jump. To bound an inch is to bound three or four times their own length, for these spiders are small. They are striped, tiger-like, and to see one spring and pull down some hardy midge is as exciting as watching a lion kill a buffalo, without the personal danger of being present at such an incident. Once I saw a daddy-long-legs fall to a tiger-spider. The daddy vastly exceeded the spider in bulk; but the carnivorous beast hurled himself upon his feeble foe, gripped it, I think, by the throat, and, himself walking backwards, dragged the victim inch by inch away to the seclusion granted by the under side of a leaf. The daddy begged hard for life. He said—

“ ‘ Look here, it’s not sport; it’s murder. I was asleep, or you’d never have collared me. Let me live, and I’ll help you to catch other things; and I’ve seen more of the world than you have, and can tell you where a lot of people, much nicer than me, have their homes round these parts.’ ”

“ He lost his nerve and his grammar together. The tiger-spider didn’t answer,

because he had his mouth full; and the daddy, who was getting fainter, appealed to me.

"Look here, guv'nor," he said, "I'm going to be eaten, and I wouldn't grumble, but it's not fair fighting. I was asleep, and he came up behind. See fair play, and make him let go. Squash him, and I'll do you a good turn, and show you where there's a beast of a fly boring holes and laying eggs in your apple tree."

"You know I never interfere with anybody," I answered.

"Quite right too," declared the tiger-spider, who was resting on the way to the leaf, but held the daddy gripped tight between his front paws while he spoke. "And it's a lie for him to say he was asleep. He was watching me like a lynx with some of his back eyes, and thought he'd be jolly clever and just fly off as I jumped. He muddled it, and I nailed him, and now I'm going to eat him."

"Quite right," I said, and then told the daddy a thing or two calculated to greatly soothe his last moments. "You are filling your place in the scheme of the universe," I assured him, as the tiger-spider hurried him away. "The weakest must fall. You will nourish the juices of this tiger-spider, and so do the work Nature arranged for you. There

was a young sparrow lived not long ago, and he spent his time in this garden; but it happened that he was not so well equipped for the battle of life as other sparrows, because he had a beak slightly faulty in construction. As a result of this he could not eat so many crumbs as other young sparrows, and so he did not grow as fast or become as strong in the wing. He was a laggard in the race for life; and Nature is with the van of her legions always; the laggards do not interest her so much. Yesterday my cat caught that weakling sparrow. I will say nothing about the sportsmanship of the act, but the sparrow was captured and eaten, because Nature saw that only as nourishment for something stronger would the sparrow ever shine in the world and be a credit to her. It is the same with you. Go to your death like a man. You've had a short life and a merry one. Now it's over, so tuck in your legs and fold yourself up generally and make a good end.'

"But he didn't see it, and refused comfort, and fought with his feeble might, putting the tiger-spider to as much trouble and inconvenience as possible. Then a strange thing happened. Just as the tiger-spider had reached his leaf, he put his foot in the corner of a web belonging to a big black spider—a sort of

grizzly-bear spider, who lives in a deep cave between two bricks, and has his snare spread before the door. He cannot jump from brick to brick, or roam over yards of wall and jungle at will, but within the limits of his own trenches and fortifications he is an awful enemy. In the heart of the wall he lives his weird, lonely life, and his web is a telephone or telegraphic apparatus, acquainting him at any instant with what is going forward in the outer world. He is a giant in strength and fierceness. He will seize a wasp or bee and lift it in the air and drag it buzzing down to death; a blue-bottle, once caught, is gone before you can look round. He eats enormously, but his nourishment all goes into muscle, for these wall-spiders do not grow bloated, as the yellow web-spinners, who gradually fatten through the summer, and who in autumn hang like little knobs of gold in the centre of their dewy nets at morning. Well, this grizzly-bear spider was in his doorway as the tiger-spider set foot on an outlying portion of the estate. In a second the black fellow tore out, dashed at the tiger-spider, knocked him heels over head, and grabbed the daddy-long-legs for himself. The daddy—poor, hapless sport and prey of fiends—shrieked while he was dragged away, and I lost the

end of his mournful farewell to life as he vanished down the hole of the black spider to return no more. The tiger-spider, shaking with rage, and, I think, somewhat bruised, climbed up again to the scene of the outrage, and sat about an inch and a half clear of the robber's web and began shouting down the hole.

"' You great, hulking coward ! Give me back my daddy, or it'll be the worse for you ! D'you think I hunt to fill your black stomach ? You haven't got the wit to catch anything yourself, but set out this dirty web that anybody can see a yard off, and that wouldn't deceive a blow-fly. Look where the snails have slimed it, and knocked mortar out of the wall into it. Call yourself a spider ! You haven't got the pluck to come out of your hole. You're a thief and a bully and a cad, and the birds would have eaten you long ago only you're such an ugly brute they don't fancy you.' Then the tiger-spider turned to me.

"' You're no better than he is : to see a blackguard thing like that done in broad daylight, and never raise your hand in the cause of justice. Poke him out if you're a man ! Don't countenance a theft like that. I know the rate he eats at, too. There won't be an

atom of my daddy left if you're not quick. It's an infernal shame. Poke him out, I say !'

"'I never interfere,' I answered ; 'you know that perfectly well, and applauded me for my inaction only two minutes ago.'

"'That was different,' he said.

"'No. Nature helps the strong. You made a mistake and had to pay for it. You knew perfectly well that within the rim of that dingy old web lived a greater spider than you, and a stronger, and yet you deliberately traversed a corner to save trouble. I'm sorry for you, but you've only got yourself to thank.'

"'It's jolly easy to pose as a philosopher and chatter all that twaddle,' said the tiger-spider, who was still very angry ; 'but if you were one of us and had to get your living on this wall by the sweat of your brow, and stand up and fight for life as I do, you wouldn't talk so big.'

"'I am one of you,' I answered ; 'I have to get my living—not on that wall, certainly, but in a position quite as crowded and difficult and dangerous. My world swarms with folks as much bigger and cleverer than I am as that black spider is bigger and cleverer than you. You think it is hard to be robbed of your daddy—so it is. I've been robbed, too,

of things which took me quite as much trouble to produce as your daddy cost you to catch. There are plenty of black spiders on my wall, I can tell you; and, supposing me to be a tiger-spider, there are plenty of other tiger-spiders too. We hunt regularly enough, and have blank days, and plenty of them. We watch one another hunting, and disparage one another's spoil behind one another's backs, and gush about one another's successes to one another's faces. We talk about a Republic of tiger-spiders, and of being brothers and comrades; we say we are always ready to help the lesser spiders lower down on the wall; but that is cant and rubbish. In this world the only man who gets a drink offered to him is the one who can easily afford to buy a drink for himself. The prosperous spiders herd together and bite each other behind; even in their prosperity most of them are as jealous and envious as it is possible for tiger-spiders to be, and the fittest only survive; the others go under.'

"At this moment the black spider came to the door of his den. He was combing his whiskers and smiling at the world.

"'Never tasted anything better in the daddy line,' he said; 'perfect condition, plump and juicy, and eatable right through.'

“‘ You brute ! You hairy, cowardly, dingy, overgrown bully,’ began the tiger-spider.

“‘ Hullo ! what’s the matter, my little man ? Who’s trodden on your corns ?’ asked the great spider in perfect good humour.

“‘ You stole my daddy, and you know it. You’re a common thief, and I’ll pay you out —see if I don’t. I’ll get the snails to come here and creep into your hole, and foul it up and ruin it.’

“ The black spider looked grave at mention of the snails. He hated them, and was powerless against them.

“ He ignored the tiger-spider, and spoke to me.

“‘ If you knew half the things the snails do of a night,’ he said, ‘ you’d be a good deal sharper on them. They play the deuce with the green-stuff and the affairs you set store by ; and they do no good to anybody. You’re the manager of the world as far as I can see, and you ought to look after my interests too. What right have snails to come here upsetting my work ?’

“‘ I never interfere,’ I said, ‘ and I’ve just been explaining to this tiger-spider that I’m nobody.’

“‘ You’re big enough to scrunch snails, anyway,’ he argued, ‘ and if you want to see

justice done and hold the scales fairly, you ought to scrunch every snail that touches my web.'

"There the matter ended. But I could tell you of many other curious scenes on that wall."

"Read me some verses instead," suggested the Laugher. "Another of your productions is due, and as I wish to do a little talking to-morrow, you can monopolize the remaining moments of this evening."

Nobody ever asks me to read my verses twice—a remark you may take which way you please. In an instant I had my latest trifle spread before me.

A Fairy Song.

I.

Where bluebells are tinkling a fairy tune
In the ear of sleeping night;
Where dewdrops laugh at the man in the moon,
And quiver with stolen light;
When the busy old world, that works by day,
Slumbers softly in dreamland far away—
'Tis then that we dance and sing and play,
Under the moon, the golden moon;
While bluebells are tinkling, tinkling, tinkling—
Bluebells are tinkling a fairy tune.

II.

Where Will-o'-the-wisp glides over the fen
To gaze upon fairy charms;
Where shadowy mists from the haunted glen
Are raising their silver arms;
Where winds of the night from afar can bring
The scent of the forest on silent wing—
'Tis there that we dance and play and sing,
Under the moon, the golden moon;
While bluebells are tinkling, tinkling, tinkling—
Bluebells are tinkling a fairy tune.

CHAPTER XXVI.

Joseph Nathan—His methods—Baron Baumgertz and the cigarettes—Joseph errs—And meets his reward
—The Laugher's comment.

My Laugher's proposed remarks on the subject of Nature were unfortunately interrupted at their very opening upon the following evening. He had hardly begun, when one of my late callers rang the bell, and came in to see me, bursting with a grave grievance. Nathan was his name—Joseph Nathan—a mercenary man—a very Shylock, whose life was spent in getting the value of two shillings for one, whose god was the Main Chance, whose favourite occupations were fishing with a sprat to catch a whale, and killing two birds with one stone. In the latter case, he generally borrowed somebody else's stone to begin with. He had a masterly way of providing brains, as a set-off to somebody else's capital. He was always in clover, always stood to win, came out of all manner of

transactions, not merely scatheless, but usually with more or less gold-dust adhering to him. Joseph Nathan was not really a very pleasant man, though, if you did not know him well, you might suppose no more thoroughly philanthropic, large-hearted person ever walked earth with his eye on heaven. I knew him intimately, because he had once put fifty pounds of mine into an absolutely safe six per cent. loan for a new Republic somewhere. The new Republic had been subsequently blown out of the water by an old Republic, and my fifty pounds went with it. Nathan said it was the hand of God. He added that other people had lost ten times as much as I had, and twenty and thirty times as much. I asked him how he had come out of it, and he said, glancing upwards, as though he wanted to catch sight of his own halo, "Well, without egotism, I think I may say it was a case of the Lord looking after His own. I sold my shares to help a needy man in dire distress. I have not lost on the transaction."

On the night in question Nathan's manner led me to suspect that for once the Lord had not looked after His own. The man suggested intense irritation, disappointment, and bad temper. His armour was off. He was reckless. He spoke disrespectfully of principalities

and powers. He questioned the wisdom and the judgment of Providence. He exclaimed against the wickedness of human nature, and the depravity of all created things. He had clearly missed two birds with one stone; or else it appeared that he had angled, as usual, for a whale with a sprat—lost the sprat altogether, and not landed the whale. Of one thing I was certain—when Joseph openly doubted to me the existence of God, I knew he must have clean lost five shillings, at the very least, and possibly more. I asked the man to sit down and tell his horrible tale, if the narration of it was likely to comfort him.

“It is a horrible tale,” he said “It shows the amount of gratitude in an ordinary man. It makes one’s heart hard against one’s fellows. It turns one’s milk of human kindness to gall. No, I thank you, I won’t drink anything. In my present frame of mind my stomach wouldn’t stand it. I’m very much upset, indeed, and as the mind acts directly on the body, it’s ten to one that I shall have gout to-night—gout, brought on entirely by the wicked action of a depraved man.”

“Well,” I said, “I’ll be bound you’ve told him what you think of him. You’ve spoken plainly?”

"Impossible. That's the hardest part of it. The man's dead. We shall never meet again—not if he receives ordinary justice. He has struck at me from the grave, as it were. The contents of his vile will, or so much of it as concerns me, reached me this morning."

"Sit down and begin at the beginning."

"The story is ten years long—or, rather, the first chapters date back ten years. In 1884 I went into Norfolk for a month's pike-fishing. I love to commune with Nature, and rest, like an infant, in her bounteous lap. So I go down there, away from the rush and whirl of work-a-day life, and endeavour to develop a childlike spirit, which is so essential to proper conduct. But, of course, one must not reject the good things of life if they are thrown into one's way. Often a little action is fraught with stupendous consequences. Often a small act of consideration for a fellow-creature is repaid a hundredfold. I know a man who ran after another man's hat, which blew off, and restored it to him. Well, the man who caught that hat received a legacy of a hundred pounds when the owner of the hat came to die. There is an even more extraordinary example of the way bread cast upon the waters may return to one after

many days. I recollect a young fellow who went outside an omnibus on a rainy night to oblige a lady. He was not a religious or God-fearing man, either—merely a gentleman. And she found out his address, and left him a thousand pounds when she died—*a thousand* for going outside a 'bus! These facts bring me to my fishing excursion and an action of mine. I may call it a good action, though I will not pretend it was done with no motive. We must make to ourselves friends of the Mammon of unrighteousness in this world sometimes. Well, to be brief, on a day when I was fishing in the heart of Norfolk, whom should I meet but that celebrated person, Baron Baumgertz, the German banker?"

"He died a week ago," I interrupted.

"Nobody knows that better than I do," answered Nathan, "but ten years ago he was alive and fishing in Norfolk. I recognized him instantly, but he did not know me. He greeted me, however, as a brother of the angle, and we had lunch together. He did me the honour to eat a duck's leg, with which I had designed to refresh the inner man, and I partook, in exchange, of ham sandwiches—dry fragments, ill cut, not to be compared with my duck's leg. Then came the opportunity to which I refer. We were

sitting beside the water, and Baron Baumgertz, suddenly taking his handkerchief from his pocket, drew with it a cigarette-case. The latter was shot violently forward and fell into the depths, instantly disappearing beyond possibility of recovery. The Baron swore. He said it would kill him to go without a cigarette till evening. He had tobacco in a pouch, but no tissue paper, and no substitute for it. I do not smoke, as you know, and when I told him so he swore at me too, and said it was a disgrace to the century to find a man of my age and apparent intelligence a non-smoker. Then I soothed him as best I might, and conceived the happy design I will relate to you. I had in my pocket-book a bank-note. Bank-notes, as you must be aware, are printed on a sort of tissue paper. You catch my idea? 'Give me your tobacco-pouch, Baron,' I said, 'and I will see what I can do.' He complied. I turned my back upon him, and soon manufactured four cigarettes of a sort. These I exhibited in triumph, and he accepted them with considerable gratitude. It was a case of sowing seed upon the waters——"

"Or a sprat to catch a whale," I interrupted.

Nathan resented the alternative, and proceeded—

"Soon afterwards the German left me, but not before I had let him know my address. I also mentioned, casually, that his cigarettes were made of a bank-note. I showed him that I was a religious-minded man too, and explained that it had ever been my ambition in life, since earliest childhood, to sacrifice myself for others. I told him that my truest happiness was to see other people happy; and I said a good many things of the same kind."

"Noble sentiments!"

"Certainly, and absolutely heartfelt in my case. You know, I think, that I am incapable of deceit?"

"What was the value of the note?"

"A natural question, and it brings me to the most painful part of the story. I certainly *thought* I had sacrificed a hundred-pound note. Honestly, that was my impression. I told the Baron so at the time, and he looked at me in absolute amazement. He said that he could hardly imagine a fellow-creature sacrificing such a sum out of pure regard for a stranger. But that is the kind of thing I do. When I got home I found I had made a mistake. It was a *five*-pound note I had sacrificed. But the action, I venture to think, was just as worthy to be

commended. It seems, however, that when I left him the German sceptic, unable to put faith in such simple generosity, made examination of one of the cigarettes, and found that they were made out of a 'fiver.' I, in good faith, had explained that they were manufactured from a hundred-pounder. This mean wretch, therefore, supposed that I had deliberately lied to him. He judged me by himself, and suspected some deep-laid plot, though Heaven knows that if I did look for some ultimate recognition of my action, the thing itself was done mainly on philanthropic motives. But he misjudged me, and bore malice, and imputed to me a lie. Fancy anybody in the city of London imputing a lie to me! Now he is dead, and in his will was a special allusion to me. The lawyers were directed to send it on. I read it to you, that you may judge to what depths human nature is capable of sinking."

He dragged out a lawyer's letter, and read the following passage, copied from Baron Baumgertz's will :—

"To Joseph Nathan, of Mincing Lane, I leave some advice. 'Tis the way of the hypocrite to over-reach himself. In that he sacrificed a five-pound note to my pressing requirements, he did well, and put me under

no small obligation; but in that he endeavoured to unduly increase the obligation by telling a foolish lie, he did foolishly. Upon his departure I found from examination of the remaining cigarettes, that he had lied. Moreover, upon inquiry, I find that the man is known in the metropolis. The compound of knave and fool is always strange. Would this Joseph Nathan have cut up his bank-note had he not known who I was? This from the grave, hoping that the man will mend in his ways if yet he lives."

"What do you think of that for a legacy?" asked the affronted man, gloomily.

"Not pleasant at all. You expected something different?"

"Naturally. Between ourselves I counted on a thousand pounds, for this German, though such a cur, was a generous man where he took a fancy."

"I don't think he took a fancy to you," I said.

"No. The great grief to me is, not that he should have left me nothing, but that he should have gone to the grave believing me capable of a falsehood, and imagining that I was a rascal."

Then Nathan arose to go.

"I tell you these things," he said, "that

you may partially realize those difficulties which face a religious and conscientious man. But, thank Heaven, I know where to look for help. Forget the remarks I made when I first came here. They were mere expressions of passing irritation. I am calm again, and will even drink a little drop of spirits before I go. The recital of my wrongs has soothed me. There is no malice in me. I can say from the bottom of my heart, 'I forgive him.' Of course, I tell you this story as a friend."

Then he took some stimulant and went home, praising God.

"What d'you make of that?" I asked my Laugher, upon the Jew's departure.

"Personally," he answered, "I agree with the defunct Baron. That man purposely lied as to the value of the note, and he has his reward. He will smart to the end of his days when he thinks upon the matter."

CHAPTER XXVII.

A rhapsody from my Laugher.

“NATURE,” said my Laughing Philosopher on the following evening, “is my subject, and I design something which you may call a rhapsody upon it.” Then he set out as follows:

“Nature alone is always true to herself; she alone through the Ages never lies, never changes, never hesitates, ever presses onward. Priestess is she of the Everlasting; to the Eternal she raises altars on earth, in sea, in sky; and nobly she bedecks and adorns them. In her Feast-days of Spring and Life, on her Fast-days of Death and Winter, she is alike magnificent. Her manifestations will last through Time, and as upon the dead face of the Moon her works are graven until that servant of Earth shall cease to be, so here also. Her manifestations, I say, will last through Time; and none lack of a thousand lessons for her last-born, her darling, her most recent triumph—Mankind. For him she has

stored her wisdom; and her story-book lies open, and he knows his letters already, and has learnt this much: that nothing from Nature's hand is small, nothing mean, nothing futile. Glorious she shines in the Morning Star, and not less gloriously in the dew upon the herb; loud she praises the Everlasting in thunder, and not less loud in the Spring songs of birds and the murmurs of hidden waters; clearly she writes the eternal law of God across storm-clouds in lightning, and upon the opening petals of the desert flower. She hides up her secrets in living books, yet blazes abroad more Truth than man has eye to see or wit to discern; her voice speaks in the growl of great beasts, and in the music of robins; in the purr of a mother tiger giving suck to her young, in the scent of a rose, in the sound of the rain. She uncovers her face at dawn and sunset in the sky, she goes naked and beautiful in the tropic sunshine; snow-clad she reigns over great silence in the land of the floe and berg. Her Bible alike gleams with golden letters in the Galaxy of Heaven and lies open upon the brown fallow and dusty hedge-row. That is where I would turn your attention—to no miracles from afar, to no waterfalls, or mountains, or transcendent glories from the sun-kissed side of the world, but to

the stars of your own firmament, the iris bow that spans your own sky when rain and sun work together there, the flower in your own garden, the magic matters that knock at your own gate. Strange peoples dwelling in far regions, where Nature's songs sound new, waken a man's heart truly to the wonder of her; but the wise learn a lesson at the same time, and get the whisper of a warning. For to such she says, 'Look ye at home; I am there as well as here. The coral knows me, and the palm; the Nile's banks, and the Amazon's; but you shall search for me in the brook under the elms and find me there. True, I lie in the sun-baked jungle with the lion; true, I walk with the grizzly bear in the mountain fastness, down the solemn aisles of the pines; but I dance also with the young rabbits along the gorse edges at eventide. And the elms and the gorse are very wonderful; neither have the young rabbits taught men all they know.'

"Nature, and the theatre in which she has placed us, must not be ignored. Life raises the curtain, the brains in our heads are the audience, Death anon ends the display; but no matter what Nature bids us behold, be sure the spectacle is great and grand and full of the wisdom of Almighty God. Oh, never

stand aside and look at Nature with lack-lustre eyes and a pulse unquickened! Use the best strength she has given you to search her and love her and learn a little of her lesson. She is your mother, too. She made all your eye can hold, your brain can grasp—and she found time to make you. Think of it! Dimly guess at her work, rolling far beyond the ken of your telescopes, hid invisible under your microscopes, above the conception of your intellects. And yet she made you, too. Yes, she is your mother; she fashioned your little heart, and set it beating before you came into the world ; she took Life from the hand of her God and gave it to you ; and you were born, and she saw you and loved you and worked for you night and day—harder than your human mother could. Which things she did because she delighted mightily in you, with a mother's delight. You are a link in her eternal chain, and each link is dear to her ; each is wrought with wondrous care to take its appointed place ; and where the links fail and snap, Mother Nature weeps and sets about the ordering of others better calculated to please her Master. You are a link, I say, a link fashioned at the later end of her labours—at the golden end of her chain. Are you a golden link? For God's sake, man, try to be ;

make your mother some return for her pains ; bring no tears to her eyes ; rather face the world blessing her for the good things she has given you. Bless her for the brains in your head, and use them ; bless her for health, if you have it, and use it well. Make her laugh and clap her hands, and not despair of you altogether.

"I tell you, men, that you are a thankless, graceless creation. What an outrage is it if one villain among you ill-treats his human mother ! How loudly and how justly the rest bawl against the brute, and mark him for a wretch beyond the pale of God's sympathy, or man's ! And yet the Mother of All has her very heart broken by her Benjamin, her last-born and best-loved, her crowning joy, the lord of her labours since the world began, that stupendous, ultimate miracle of her work under God : the created thing with conscious intelligence. Happy enough she was until you came ; happy she was until you grew wise ; but that awful masterpiece, the brain of you, once set moving, could no more be stopped. Her work was taken out of her hands ; you began to know better than does she ; like the schoolboy home for the holidays, full of his little world of school, who overflows with great importance, and tells his mother she is behind

the times, so you to Nature. You only obey where experience tells you it is fatal not to do so ; she rules by fear in certain directions, but by love in none. You use her remorselessly ; you suck her life's blood to fatten yourselves ; you slay her savage, primal men till there are none left, and her great beautiful beasts till they have vanished. You take, take, take with both hands, and pay nothing back but your dirty little worn-out bodies, when Death puts his foot on you—which operation, you assert, is paying the debt of Nature. Ingrates ! Is *that* all you owe her ? As well talk of paying your debts to God Almighty. Him you can praise and thank. For Nature you can do no more. But you will laugh at this, as you would laugh if I bid you bend the knee to the Sun. Nature is a holiday-book, a summer romance, amusing, exciting even, to be sought for awhile when you need new health and rest and fresh air. After that, she is to be forgotten until next year. For the rest, she is a mere laboratory for scientists, not an oratory for every thinking soul. It is a lie to suppose so ; and you who have been blessed in mind and body by her should combat the lie henceforth, should fight for her, should explain her wisdom to those who think they suffer unjustly at her hands. She is essential

to everything that is human ; her lessons are human lessons, her truths are human truths ; she is the Sacred Veil of the Temple which hides your God from you, and yet marks where you shall find the Holy Places. Behind that Curtain lies the Truth ; upon the fabric of it, mirrored in moving life, in sunshine and storm, in the gloom of night and the gleam of stars, are set forth the wonders of the world ; and through that veil of Nature there beams a radiant Light, shining from the Source of Light, shining universally, shining for all."

When my Laugher, who was rarely as serious as this, had made an end of his rhapsody, I thanked him, and said he had furnished me with much food for thought.

"I am, however, not quite sure whither your conclusions tend," I ventured to remark ; "indeed, I almost think your logic tripped here and there. You will pardon the criticism, I know."

"One does not look for logic in a rhapsody," he replied ; "but as a matter of fact, I was before everything careful to avoid any such error as you indicate. I know what you wish to say—Nature is not wholly beautiful ; she is hard, remorseless, and has no pity for the weak. You are mistaken. She has no attributes of mere human significance ; she

is hard only as the diamond is hard—because it was so created. She is not the Everlasting, recollect, only His Priestess, and, as such, the manifestation of perfect, sublime obedience. That is beautiful, and not to be found elsewhere."

"But, candidly, we have improved on her," I said. "Our moralists have shown her to be very immoral; our artists have explained that she is very inartistic; civilization, in fact, gives her the lie direct in several directions. Man cannot be natural now. Nature is merely an excuse for Art to-day. No adult behaves naturally. If he did so, he would be put into a lunatic asylum. We have, in fact, left Nature behind, and she is getting left farther and farther in the rear every century."

"That is your opinion?" he asked icily.

"Not mine particularly. But a reflection of the world's attitude towards Nature generally."

He laughed that musical laugh which will haunt me to my death-bed.

"And yet, having confessed that much, you can still blame me for saying that when Nature produced Man she was brought to bed of the greatest joke which Creation has ever witnessed? I tell you yet again that your race is the most comical, small, grandly

amusing aggregate of atoms a humorous God ever designed in a jovial moment!"

"I don't know anything about that," I said; "and I won't pursue it—first, because I entirely agree with you; secondly, because I want to read you a short—"

But even as I spoke the clock struck one, and the life went out of my Laugher's face, leaving it mere battered bronze. I rummaged up my poem, notwithstanding, and placed it in readiness against the following night.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

Of amateur photographers — The camera fiend — Joe Gregory — His misfortunes — Photographed by an amateur — *Two Voices.*

THE Laugher showed no particular inclination to remind me of my promise to read him a poem when our talk began upon the following evening. This may have been accident or intention, but I had warned him that I proposed rehearsing an effort in verse, and now dragged it out, and placed it before me.

“ You will like this,” I said confidently ; “ for it concerns Nature, and was written in her lap, so to speak.”

“ If, when Fortune places you in the lap of Nature, you find nothing better to do than write verses, your frame of mind is to be deplored,” said the Laugher. “ Let the verses come afterwards, if they will ; let recollection and dream-pictures of the past rise up and prompt to poetry if you like, but to draw forth your tablets in the heart of wild scenery, and sit down critically, and grapple

for rhymes, and so forth, is vile. The man who can deliberately plan verses at the expense of fine scenery is no poet. I tell you that the last thing a true poet would think upon when seated in Nature's lap is a poem. Such moments should be devoted to simple worship and praise. But you are no poet at all. I tell you frankly, you have all the instincts of an amateur photographer. I think it would be hard to speak with greater severity than that."

"If you were human, I should be angry with you," I answered; "and if I thought you were right, I should be crushed; but I don't think you are. In fact, I feel sure, in my own mind, and without conceit, that you are mightily mistaken. If you knew what I feel to amateur photographers, you would never attribute their instincts to me. The tame monster that follows them wherever they go—the weird cyclops on three legs, with a body like a concertina, in a black velvet coat—the photographic apparatus, which cannot lie, and yet never tells the truth, is no friend of mine, I assure you. Why, one of my greatest chums lost five thousand pounds through being photographed by an amateur. Mind, I do not assert that a professional picture would have attained to more satisfactory results, but the camera fiend is more

fiendish in connection with the amateur than any qualified person who makes his serious living by its manipulation. You might like to hear the story of poor Joe Gregory, perhaps?"

"I should," said the Laugher. "Anything redounding to the discredit of photography will interest me. I deem it a vile invention, base and mechanical."

"When Joe Gregory was born, his mother, like all mothers, began worrying, as soon as she was well enough, to have him photographed. This desire to get the newly-arrived atom perpetuated on a plate is, I may tell you, as common to-day as the maternal instinct itself. The camera fiend looks out at human nature through his cold glass eye, and reflects the entire human comedy from the cradle to the grave. Personally, I hold that to preserve the photographs of new-born babies is not less horrible than to adorn albums with pictures of the dead taken in their grave-clothes. But many people like both. To return, Mrs. Gregory had her infant baptized, photographed, and vaccinated on the same day—a hard morning's work, I think, for a three-weeks'-old infant. But every respectable baby suffers that weird trinity of circumstances. Professional persons baptized and vaccinated my friend Joe, and I imagine that these

operations were adequately performed, for he is a Church-goer up to the present time, and has never had small-pox, or anything of the sort; but an amateur photographed him, and thus wrong was done to the tune of five thousand pounds. You see the Gregory family lived in India, and Gregory's mother's uncle dwelt at home. This man, possessing more money than judgment, had promised Mrs. Gregory by letter, that if she bore a son worth looking at, the infant might expect to start life with five thousand pounds at his banker's. On hearing of the child's advent, this eccentric person wrote privately to a friend living in Madras, and explained to him that he wanted a picture of the babe, but that its parents must on no account be told for whom the likeness was intended. An amateur was told off to the task, and Mrs. Gregory accepted his services gratefully enough, for photographers were rare at that time, and, as I have said, she much desired a picture herself. But she had no intention of sending the photograph home, least of all to the gentleman most interested, for she rightly argued that the human infant at three weeks old, though a thing of beauty and a joy for ever to those responsible for it, is often misjudged by outsiders. Joe, then, in the first more or less

loathsome stage of his animal existence, was photographed by an amateur. Rashes disfigured my friend at the time ; the fatuous stare of the extremely youthful was upon his face ; but no germ or glimmer of conscious intelligence as yet lurked there. He was taken with remorseless, with brutal attention to detail. The open triangular mouth, the awful forehead, the bald skull, the helpless, toothless, hairless, brainless, unbeautiful beginning of Joe Gregory was stamped upon the plate. He has the hideous image of his earliest days even now. Sometimes he looks at it when the world smiles on him, and things prosper, and he feels inclined to unduly vaunt himself. I need not say that the spectacle, though now somewhat tarnished by years, always sobers him in a moment. Well, the callow fearfulness of Joe, as reproduced by this amateur photographer from Madras, was presently printed and despatched to the man eagerly waiting for it at home. When Mrs. Gregory first saw a copy, it is reported that she tore the thing up indignantly, and refused to say 'Good-bye' to the man who took it when he started on his return journey ; but though she had the priceless original by her day and night, and could afford to ignore the horrid and insulting burlesque of him

produced as I have stated, her wealthy relative at home was bound to accept the photograph as a fair and unprejudiced presentment of the man-child about which he took such considerable interest. While Mrs. Gregory in India was saying, 'I shall not send dear Uncle John a photograph of baby till he is a little older, and we can have him properly taken,' Uncle John was already destroying his eyes with a new Gorgon in the shape of the photograph by that amateur at Madras. The spectacle decided him. He returned the picture directly to Joe's mother, and explained that under the circumstances he hoped she would try again, and that his former offer would hold good for any brother of Joe's, but was entirely withdrawn so far as concerned him. 'I am sorry for you both,' he wrote, 'and for the child. I am also sorry for myself, for, frankly, the sudden sight of this picture was a shock, and has done me no good. I cannot pretend to any interest in Joe. He repels me. God grant the infant may grow out of it, or return to his Maker!' Of course Mrs. Gregory was annoyed. Any mother would have been. And especially as Joe was daily growing into a remarkably handsome and intelligent infant. Adequate photographs were immediately sent home, but Uncle John refused to look at them.

He renewed his offer concerning any future brother of Joe's, but declined, on the plea of health, to inspect any picture of the child again. The parents had just arranged an elaborate plot to have Joe painted by an artist and his portrait sent home to be hung up somewhere under Uncle John's nose, when the old man died, and the whole affair fell through. That's what an amateur photographer did for Joe. To-day he is one of the best-looking men in London. And yet I suppose we must admit the camera fiend does his duty according to his lights. What think you?"

"I regret the strength of his position while admitting it," answered the Laugher. "I note the battle Art is fighting with him. She does not disdain his aid. That is a pity, for he is a pushing fiend, and will stick at nothing. Nature certainly has suffered many things from him."

"He is a pessimist," I said. "He works as cheaply as a German. He has powerful friends."

"Truly," replied the bronze. "Powerful beyond question. I see the hyperbolic demon in my mind's eye now, walking firm-footed over the earth, with one hand in that of Science, the other in the Sun's. I think," he continued, suddenly changing the subject, "that it is now almost too late to hear your poem. Shall we leave it until to-morrow?"

"To-morrow never comes," I answered cheerfully. "Better hear it now, and have done with it. There are but three verses, after all. It might be worse."

Then I gave him the threatened effort—

Two Voices.

I.

List to the song of the wild wood dove
 Where silver streamlets twine ;
 While summer skies are blue above,
 He bends his head to his lady-love
 'Mid boughs of scented pine.
 There's a cooing, cooing, cooing,
 And the voices of the river
 Sigh an echo to his wooing
 In a cadence low and long.
 There's a sobbing, sobbing, sobbing,
 Where the dusky pine-tops quiver
 With the crooning and the throbbing
 And the murmur of the song.

II.

Heed ye the notes of the clear sheep-bell
 When flocks are roaming free.
 By granite tor, in distant dell,
 On rocky steps of the rugged fell
 They echo cheerily.
 There's a jingle, jangle, jingle
 Over all the purple heather,
 Where the golden furzes mingle,
 Where the rushes fringe the beck.
 There's a jangle, jingle, jangle
 As each patriarchal wether
 Shakes the laughing bells that dangle
 To a thong about his neck.

III.

Hark to the howl of the Northern blast
That screams of coming woe,
When winter's iron fingers cast
A frozen mantle upon the past,
And sheet the world in snow.
There's a wailing, wailing, wailing—
From the icy desolation
Bursts a frantic, all-prevailing
Cry of ruth where torrents roll.
There's a moaning, moaning, moaning,
And the sad reverberation
Of the universal groaning
Stills my heart and chills my soul.

"There are many subtle points you will have missed in this," I explained at its conclusion. "The 'Two Voices' of the title are those occupied with the first and second portion of each stanza respectively. You note the sudden change of metre, and the altered swing of the lines in every case. That is because the first voice stops and the second begins. The two voices hear the same wild music of bird and bell and blast, but it appeals to them differently. I will explain all this to-morrow night."

"Not if I can prevent it," he said. Which ended the proceedings.

CHAPTER XXIX.

Horatio Pugsley—His hatred of humanity—His views on
sanity—And bodily health—His hair—His gout—
His prophecy—His eternal part.

It must not be supposed that I have recorded every one of those nocturnal interviews enjoyed by me with my bronze Laugher. Far from it. Our interchange of ideas was on several occasions of much too private a nature to print. You will easily understand that I took numerous opportunities of consulting him upon purely private affairs. His vast experience enabled him to give me invaluable advice on many of the concerns of life. To this day I regulate my conduct by his counsel, and only regret that my notorious garrulity prevented me from listening more and talking less. But I do not blame myself alone. My friends, during that period of fifty days through which it was vouchsafed my Laugher to enjoy conscious existence and the power of speech, seemed to enter into a conspiracy to frustrate

our mighty confidences. Again and again, as I have narrated, we were rudely interrupted on the very threshold of discourses, which had doubtless turned the world upside down if recorded. I remember, for instance, an evening which the Laugher proposed devoting to the subject of "Other Worlds than Earth, and the Inhabitants of Them." Upon this fascinating theme he designed to speak, but Fate decreed otherwise, and he had scarce uttered his first golden word of wisdom when there came in to see me an undetected madman by the name of Horatio John Pugsley. He called himself Professor Pugsley, and nobody ever troubled to contradict him, though he was no more a Professor than you are. The only thing he ever professed was an undying detestation of his own race. He hated men, women, and children; he loathed humanity generally; he said he would rather have been born an ox, or an ass, or a Bengal tiger than a man. Many people have wished that Nature had gratified Pugsley in this whim, for in addition to being a man, he was a bore, rode his fatuous hobbies to death in public, and often scandalized religious and rational people with his views of human life. As a matter of fact, the Professor should long since have been under lock and key; but it was a case of

everybody's business being nobody's business. Hardly a soul belonged to him. I think not one person would have been a penny the better for locking him up, so nobody took the trouble; and he rambled through life supported by a small income and his huge grievances.

He came in, sat down, and regarded me with a look of withering contempt.

"What worms we all are!" he began suddenly. "Has it ever struck you how utterly, how hopelessly, every one of us depends on our surroundings for our well-being, our comfort, and even our lives?"

"We are born into a certain environment," I answered, "and naturally depend upon it for physical existence. It is always Nature's ambition to give the new-comer a fair chance at the start. Even an insect knows the best place to lay its egg."

"Men are insects. Look at me. An hour ago I quenched my thirst. Yet such is the paltry and faulty nature of my fleshy machinery that now, some seven and fifty minutes from last drinking, I am thirsty again."

That was the extraordinary way in which Professor Pugsley would ask for a whisky-and-soda.

"Why don't you say you want something

to drink, Professor? It is a hot evening, and doubtless you have walked fast, as you always do. There is nothing strange or faulty in the fact of your being thirsty. Soda or water?"

"Not soda. I can only take potash. There again! What a confession of weakness! My miserable system is so vilely constituted, that a mere chemical trifle like soda puts it completely out of gear."

"Everybody has his weak spot. The thing is to know it. A man is always a fool or a physician by the time he has reached forty."

"Exactly; which is as much as to say that every man is half rotten before he is ripe—like a pear with a maggot in it. Yes, horrible as it may seem, I tell you there is no such thing as a sound, adult human being. We won't discuss the physical side of the question, because every man is aware of the rents in his own earthy tabernacle; every intelligent being is familiar with his own weak spot, whether it is a tooth, or a toe, or a joint, or a faulty organ; but the horrible thing is that what we are pleased to call our minds are in no better plight. It has been overlooked by centuries of professional men, and yet remains a horrid fact, that no man of forty is sane. You are mad, I am mad; monarchs, statesmen, prelates, everybody of over forty is

mad. Sanity becomes a non-existent condition after that age."

"Dear me!" I said. "How do you arrive at such a conclusion? We know the faculties lose their best power later in life, but not at forty."

"They begin at that age, and in many cases earlier. Take yourself. Why are you at this minute strumming on the handles of your armchair, and continually looking at your watch? Because you have not absolute control of your nerve-centres. There is a weak spot in your brain, or else you would not look at your watch three times in five minutes. Can you tell me the time? No. You have to look again. You have therefore looked at your watch-face thrice in five minutes, and yet not learnt the time from it. Every day of your life you do a thousand things as senseless as that. Therefore you are mad. You are not dangerous, but simply imbecile in certain directions. That is the word which most accurately describes the condition of us all. I say you are imbecile. You did not know that till this moment. Nobody knows it but you and me. Very likely you will hide it to your dying day, but the fact remains: your mind is as defective as your body."

"Come, Professor, my body's all right, surely?"

"Nonsense; and you know it is. Who gets influenza as regularly as his Christmas bills? Who had an attack of rheumatism only three weeks ago, and could not come to my lecture at the Town Hall in consequence? You did. And the germ is in you now, gnawing at your vital centres, no doubt. Ultimate death, in the shape of influenza and rheumatism, is in you as you sit there. And yet you say you are sound. You're mad to say so."

"And you, Professor?"

"Well, you have only to look at me to note seeds of insanity and death. Are they reasonably mild?"

He stretched out his hand for a cigar, cut the tip off with a pen-knife, and continued—

"Just consider my appearance, and tell me what you see."

"I see a stout man, past his prime, perhaps, but healthy-looking, and of good complexion. He is soberly clad in black, wears a rather old-fashioned frill to his shirt, and an old-fashioned chain to his watch. His costume is intensely rational. Even his boots are made for comfort."

"That's what you *think* you see. And now

I will tell you what you really see. Before you sits a bald, fat man in spectacles, with boots too large for him. What does that all mean? It represents disease, decay, insanity, and ultimate death—probably at no distant date."

"Positively, Professor, I don't see it. Nobody at your age ever had a better head of hair."

"You are blind, then, as well as mad. Follow me, and I will explain. The man before you is bald. His hair has gone. He was born bald; he will die bald. Nature supplied him with hair on his head for thirty years only. Then it disappeared. The man's paltry system was powerless to keep the hair on his head, or the teeth in his mouth. Petty human arts have supplied the place of the latter and the former. See!"

He snatched off his wig triumphantly, and continued—

"His teeth are likewise capable of removal, and, again, he wears glasses. His own optical arrangements are hopelessly deranged. Without artificial aid he is blind as an old owl in daylight. Again, his boots are too large. Why? Because his father had gout, and handed it down to him, and it has upset his extremities. Moreover, he is ridiculously fat.

Why? Because he eats too much habitually, and does not take nearly as much exercise as he should. Why does he eat too much, and not take nearly as much exercise as he should? Because he is greedy and lazy; because his mind has no power to control his bodily appetites in these loathsome directions. That is to say, he is mad. Lastly, what will be the end of his fatness and laziness? I will tell you—apoplexy and dissolution."

"This is to examine too curiously, Professor. But, knowing these things, why don't you mend?"

"Why should I? I'm not worth it. What's the use of trying to tinker a vessel such as this?"

He contemptuously pointed at himself with his thumb.

"But the eternal part, Professor? Are not such views rather hard on the soul within?"

"My dear sir, the soul within is not worth considering at this stage of its career. As you know, I hold with transmigration on certain lines. Everything has a soul, and everything will enjoy a future existence, but the beasts and birds go into Heaven before we do. Heaven, in fact, will be full of beasts and birds in a perfected state. You shall

find birds and beasts and children there—no grown up people at all. The lion will lie down with the lamb ; the baby will play with the snake. All will be peace and purity. What should you or I do there ? ”

“ Then what becomes of us, Professor ? ”

“ We go out ; and a good thing, too. We go out, and our souls enjoy a fresh incarnation. You may inhabit parrot or porcupine ; I may take the field as an elephant or wild boar ; but don’t imagine you’ll get into Heaven as a man of forty-five, because you won’t, and the sooner you recognize the fact the better for your peace of mind.”

The clock struck one, and he started to his feet.

“ I must go, worm that I am,” he said. “ Just consider the position at this moment. It will illustrate the vileness of us both. The hour is one in the morning. Yet we sit here turning night into day, under hateful artificial lights, invented in defiance of Nature’s laws. We sit here, when every respectable animal, excepting the nocturnal ones, has been asleep for hours ; we sit here smoking the herb of the field ; drinking spirits, which are undoubtedly a liquid inspired of the devil. No, not another drop, thank you. I’ve had too much already. Here, I say, we sit : two bald,

diseased, failing lunatics ; and yet we—or, rather, you—have the audacity to speculate about getting to Heaven. We, who could hardly be considered a credit to an ordinary human institution—a workhouse, for instance —prattle about Heaven, as if the door of the place was already thrown wide open for us. Mad folly, sir ! Good night to you.”

He departed, and it struck me that for the public benefit somebody ought to engage two medical men, and get the Professor signed up. A man with such views has no business to be at large.

CHAPTER XXX.

More of Pugsley—The paragon of animals—Jellaby—He visits Brighton—Eastbourne—Seven Dials—Hanwell—Richmond—And Peckham Rye—He bursts on the aristocracy.

“ You will naturally understand,” said my Laugher on the following evening, “ that your eccentric friend, Professor Pugsley, appeals to me with particular force, for his estimate of humanity is practically my own.”

“ Then,” said I, “ you must see the madness of your theory; for nobody but an insane man could hold it. You will surely not argue that Pugsley has his wits about him? ”

“ He is eccentrically sane. His contempt for his own species has, perhaps, turned his head in a measure. The singular fact to me is that more of you do not go mad when you reflect on your own deficiencies. Touching the Professor, I should imagine now that he was a man who had made some stir in the world. Is it not so? ”

“ Well, he has made a vast number of

people laugh, and there are good stories told against him. Nobody takes the man seriously, of course. Numerous jests are recorded at his expense. I know no funnier anecdote than the history of one of the man's most extensive and maddest experiments. He wrote the whole matter out afterwards and had it printed, and sent it to the more scientific journals and reviews. All returned it, directing the Professor to submit his experience to a comic newspaper. He gave me a copy of the pamphlet. If you think you would enjoy hearing his extravagant narrative, I will read it to you."

"The thing is likely to give me pleasure," said my Laugher. "I pray you rehearse it. My sympathies, however, are with the Professor. He is misunderstood, and has come into the world too soon. Perhaps ten thousand years hence you human beings will not be so satisfied with yourselves as you are at present."

I pulled out a portfolio from a corner, made search in it, and presently came upon Professor Pugsley's pamphlet.

THE CASE OF JELLABY.

"I picked him out of the gutter. He was lying therein very drunk, trying to sing

'Britons never will be slaves.' They never will be anything else so long as half a pint of beer can be bought for three-halfpence. I saw in Jellaby a microcosm of the human race. He was wholly vile. He had not one good quality. His record was lamentable. He suited me exactly. I said to myself, 'Jellaby shall burst like a bombshell on his fellow-creatures; Jellaby shall be the looking-glass in which mankind may see its face reflected. He shall accompany me round England as an example of the depravity of humanity. I will stand him on a pedestal before huge mixed audiences and lecture upon him. I will bring him home to the masses and the classes. Here is Jellaby at my feet in the gutter, a type of grovelling mankind. I will label him the 'Paragon of Animals' and take him through England. He is a fact—a solid, living, heartbreaking fact. There is no escaping from him. My audiences shall face him and hear him swear, and see him drink and smoke and lie. The classes shall pay five shillings for their seats; the masses shall come in free.'

"I bargained with Jellaby when he was partially sober on the following morning. He languished in a police-cell at the time, for I had given him in charge over-night. He

consented to come and be lectured on and travel through the large towns for five pounds a week. He seemed hurt at my estimation of him, but he said times were bad and he was not proud. He hinted, however, that he might reform at any moment. 'In that case,' I said, 'your occupation will be gone. But I do not fear that alternative. You are beyond reformation. As a shocking example you may bring your fellow-man to see his own hideous picture reflected in you. But as for personal reformation, you have passed that stage. No, you will continue to drink and lie and steal if you get the opportunity. You may even slay me in some moment of fury.' 'No fear, old cock,' he said, 'I shan't kill the goose what lays the golden eggs. I see your little game. Well, I'll do the best as I can for you. I was "supering" at the Elephant and Castle for three years, and I'm a bit of a actor myself. I'll pitch it as thick as you please, on the stage and hoff. Only when I'm run in, which'll 'appen pretty frequent, you'll 'ave to come and bail me out—see?' I replied that for my own purposes I should do so. I also advised him not to pretend anything. 'Don't attempt to act,' I said; 'I am content that you should be yourself. You have told me your history. That, in connection

with a personal inspection of you upon the platform, will be enough for my audience.'

"I delivered my first lecture at Brighton. It seemed a fairly good sink of iniquity to choose. Jellaby was both drunk and blasphemous on the night, and I was in very good form too. But the police interfered, and the officials explained that the lunatic asylum would end my career if I persisted. I rejoiced at that. The iron had entered into their souls; the awful lesson had gone home. I don't say Brighton is a better place in consequence of that lecture, but it ought to be. At Eastbourne Jellaby got his head broken when I was lecturing on the beach to some sailors. He threatened to resign, but changed his mind. The sailors were, upon the whole, worse than Jellaby; they took my utterances personally, as I meant them to, and but for the police I must have gone into the sea. I rejoiced again. Jellaby and I stung them to the quick. It is hard to touch the moral centre of a mariner, but Jellaby and I did it. The chemist put him all right afterwards.

"As time progressed I found the work with Jellaby very arduous. He became stationary from a moral point of view. I had expected to see him go down the hill fast when in

receipt of five pounds a week, but, somewhat to my surprise, he did not. He bought a new suit of clothes, and on the occasion of my lecture in Seven Dials to the Ratcatchers' Association, Jellaby and I were the only sober people in the building.

"Again, at the Lunatic Asylum, Hanwell, Jellaby was absolutely sober, and sat and smoked his pipe in a humble, penitent sort of way while I lectured on him. As a result, he had the sympathies of the spectators on his side from start to finish. Of course, the audience was peculiarly constituted ; but still I took occasion afterwards to remind Jellaby of the position, and to hint that yellow kid gloves and a red rose in the button-hole were not those things one reasonably looks for in an example of the lowest depth of human depravity. He did better at Richmond, and the lecture was not finished, because, when I called him 'this brute beast in human shape,' he came across the stage and thumped me on the head, and endeavoured to bite my ear off. At Peckham Rye I had him on a chain, and the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals interfered. But these were my last real successes, and soon afterwards, when Jellaby took to coming to the lectures in evening dress, and gave up a

pipe for cigars, I had to change the nature of my entertainments. With an ordinary low-class audience, evening dress is itself a sufficient argument against total depravity. This outward respectability really made Jellaby a more hideous spectacle than ever, looked at from the proper point of view. To compare the whiteness of his shirt-front with the blackness of his heart, or redness of his nose, was one of the most instructive and effective parts of my address. But habits of temperance grew on him; he absolutely refused, on the score of health, to be drunk more than once a week. Then, knowing myself that he was really vile as ever beneath this veneer of reformation, and within the whitened sepulchre of his false shirt-front, I began taking him to the 'at homes,' and 'conversazioni' of the aristocracy. Jellaby burst upon the fancied security of duchesses, upon the lax morality of dukes, and earls, and baronets. Jellaby and I flogged the 'upper ten' with scorpions. They laughed and applauded; but I have seen many a blue-blooded dowager turn white under her paint as I stripped Jellaby's nature to the bone; I have seen the owner of half a county gnaw his moustache and shiver before the reflection of his own baseness, as manifested in my analysis of Jellaby.

" But reviewing the experience, I say, unhesitatingly, that it did no practical good whatever to anybody but Jellaby. Like the viper in the countryman's bosom, he ultimately turned upon me, and stung the hand that had lifted him from the gutter. Not to put too fine a point upon it, he took the pledge, engaged himself to be married, and began going to church on Sunday evenings. I think his real vileness never appeared more strikingly than in his treatment of me when our relations terminated. ' You'll have to look up a new monster of depravity, Guv'nor,' he said one afternoon to me. ' My gal says I've played the part long enough, and she don't 'old with me a dancin' round the country after you like a tame bear tied to a lunatic. I take the offertory bag round now of a Sunday night, and it don't seem in keeping with the show, do it ? ' ' Go,' I replied, ' go, worm that you are. Return to your former life, and drag this miserable woman down to your own level. That, recollect, is the gutter. Don't think you can reform, because you cannot, and you have not. I give you a week to be caught stealing from that offertory bag. I know you.'

" Then he left me with these words—

" ' And I give you a week to keep outside Colney Hatch. You're the biggest madman

in this 'ere Metropoliss, and that's saying something. And I'll tell you another *thing*: *don't drink so much whisky*. Look at home. Take more care of yourself, old 'oss. While you're dancin' round reformin' of 'uman nature generally, you're going down the hill yourself faster'n faster. I know you—a reg'lar old grog-barrel—that's what you are. Turn over a new leaf; take my advice. I've 'ad over three 'undred pounds of your brass, and I don't wish you no 'arm. But you must try and pull up, though I'm afraid it's too late. Good-bye, Pugsley, old crank; I'll send you some tracts later on, if you'll promise to read 'em.'

"Then he went forth to be married. Which concludes the case of Jellaby."

CHAPTER XXXI.

The Professor's ambition—He gratifies it in Fiji—He emulates the child of Nature—Weakness of the flesh
A night scene—The footprint—The empty bottle.

"I would willingly have more of Pugsley," began my Laugher on the following evening.
"The man attracts me."

"Then I will tell you another story about him," I answered. "It is a companion picture to that of Jellaby, and resulted from one of the Professor's most frantic freaks. Once upon a time he got it into his head that man, to be possible at all, must be natural. The natural primeval man took his fancy, and he went about for the space of six months openly deplored the fact that he was not a Wankey Poo, or a Pondo Kaffir, or a South Sea Islander, or something of that kind. 'They, at least, are natural,' he would say, 'and that is something. They are children of the Sun and the Moon. They are primitive, and Nature loves them. I would willingly change

places with such folks ; I would willingly barter my broadcloth, and leather boots, and silk hat, and so-called civilization for their naked simplicity and savage grandeur. I can even imagine a shadow of self-respect returning to me under such conditions. I see myself walking clad with sunshine and the shadows of tropical foliage ; I picture my wigwam or hut on the Equator ; I imagine myself the leader of some barbaric horde, which has never drunk stimulants or eaten cooked meat. I am a simple child of Nature at heart, and I gasp to be amongst those who enjoy similar opinions.' Professor Pugsley was a good deal younger than he is now when these ambitions fired his soul. His contempt for humanity only extended to civilized races in those days. He thought the world of the savage peoples, and the wilder and ruder they were the better he liked them. Finally, he went abroad himself to throw in his lot with the most debased and primitive community he could find. It was his experience on that occasion which, doubtless, decided him henceforth to treat all mankind with indiscriminate and comprehensive scorn.

"He went to the Fiji Islands, and his story, as he tells it, runs as follows. You know the Professor is eccentric. I have sometimes

suspected that he dreamed these wonderful adventures, and that he never landed in a Fiji Island at all. But he believes his own narrative, and frequently repeats it with but trifling discrepancies of detail. Upon the whole, this version, which I noted down one evening after hearing it from the author, is the best."

Then I read my Laugher a thrilling account of Pugsley's foreign travel. Thus it ran:—

"In 1874 the entire Archipelago of the Fiji Islands, two hundred and fifty-four in number, was formally ceded to Great Britain; and during the following year I went out to see them. The vessel which carried me and my fortunes was touring for pleasure amongst these exquisite isles, and the captain of it acceded, though reluctantly, to my request that I should be dropped at a secluded islet innocent of human habitation, wild, beautiful, and untamed—a very gem from Nature's workshop. I told the commander of the craft that he need not trouble to call again, but he said that he designed to go back the same way in about a month, and expressed a determination to look me up, so that I might return with him to civilization if I had changed my mind. A boat brought me to shore, with a few provisions, though I protested at these, for it

seemed a desecration to land tins of Australian mutton on this virgin strand. Our keel grated against live coral, and the leather shoe of civilization stamped its hideous impress on the snowy sands as I walked up the beach. Fortunately the next tide would remove that loathsome indication. As soon as the boat had gone I retired beneath a palm tree, took off my clothes and then consigned them to the sea. The Australian mutton I flung into a mass of tropical vegetation, never intending to eat flesh again. The only adjunct of civilization I retained was my pair of spectacles. These, vile custom and short sight made absolutely necessary to me. I fashioned a pair of light pants out of the rich jungle foliage, and then wandered forth to see the land.

"Thereupon began a hideous struggle with inherited instincts and hateful habits. My heart was already the heart of a child of Nature; my wretched body was that of a man on the wrong side of forty, accustomed all its life to home comforts, and clothes, and artificial foods, and the usual environment of complex horrors within the reach of a good income. I cursed the thing called human progress as I walked. My feet felt it first, for the child of Nature has skin like leather on his walking extremities; I possessed

nothing but the bunion of civilization. Hot sand blistered me, simple lowly forms of wild life stung me and found nourishment in me; thorns entered me and tore my flesh. Then came hunger and thirst, and a paltry headache from the hot sunshine. I turned into the shade and ate bananas and drank from a purling brook. This was my first happy moment, and even then the old noisome instincts were there, and I found myself wishing for a little drop of stimulant to take off the edge of the crystal waters. Anon, I flung myself down and slept in a savage, innocent, primitive sort of way, without pillow or coverlet. I woke late in the afternoon, cold and stiff, to find the sun setting in a blaze of tropical magnificence, and a spider as big as a thrush sitting on my left knee. It was harmless, and hastened away when it saw me awake. I ate and drank once more, then wandered to the seashore and watched the sunset. The moment the orb sank night began, and the temperature went down rapidly. 'To-morrow,' I said, 'I will build me a rude hut of plantain leaves to keep the heavy nocturnal dews from wetting me to the skin. Fire, too, I must have, and will obtain it from the friction of dry sticks, after the fashion of the primal man.' I had rather hoped to find savages

and fling in my lot with them, but no sign or sight of human life had challenged my attention as yet. The spirit was still willing and eager as ever, but the flesh grew very weak after the sun had set. It was cold ; I had not got a stitch of any sort ; I would have given a thousand pounds for a blanket and a decent meal. I dug a hole in the sand, and covered up as much of myself as I could, and tried to sleep again. Huge crabs came in the night under the impression I was dead. When they found I was not, they sat round in a ring and waited for me to die. They evidently judged it was only a question of a little patience. But the morning dawned at last, and the sun warmed me, and I rose and said, ‘Now for more bananas and the purling brook.’ I made the best of it, and felt fairly cheerful, and dodged a snake that I thought wasn’t a snake until it got up on the point of its tail and tried to bite me. After breakfast I set about my hut, and tore down boughs, and made various savage beasts angry. These, for the most part, were too small to argue with me, but the snakes could not be gauged by their size. The poisonous serpent is, of course, the child of Nature’s first enemy. Midday came, and when my thoughts turned to refreshment, base



"They were waiting for me to die."

instincts begot of custom for a moment conquered, and I actually heard myself say aloud, 'Bananas be —— I've had enough to last me a lifetime.' As a punishment, I made myself devour a large bunch, and I washed them down with milk from a green cocoanut, which liquid was, if anything, more insipid than the purling brook. Dinner done, my instincts made me long for a newspaper, or a book, or a cigar, or anything. It struck me the simple child of Nature must find time hang heavy on his hands. I began to think of Robinson Crusoe. He was busy as a bee. But then a gulf lay between him and me. He deliberately utilized every shred and scrap of civilization the wreck left to him; I had as deliberately renounced civilization and all its works. And now I began to feel that I had acted with undue haste. After forty years of the grossest artificiality a man cannot instantly become the child of Nature. Two resolute persons might do so if they backed up one another with mutual encouragement and support; but the solitary man will find it a difficult and even thankless task. Towards the evening of the second day I found myself with a severe cold in the head. Moreover, too many bananas had overpowered my system; my efforts to obtain

fire had failed ; I had become piebald under the action of the tropical sunshine ; and when the glorious orb of day went down below the horizon, I instantly grew light-headed with the cold. My hut was no practical good to me, though it afforded scorpions and other minor wonders of creation opportunities. The curious fact was that everything on that island seemed to be against me. I came amongst them, having put away all that might have made me unpleasant to them. I walked with them as a child of Nature, like themselves ; I bore no weapon ; I only wished to live and let live. But they combined against me ; they stung me, and nibbled me, and gnawed me ; some tried to kill me ; others merely waited for me to die ; the very fruits of the land turned against me ; and for that matter God is aware I turned against them, too, after the third day. I spent the morning of it feebly groping about for the Australian meat tins ; but when I found them I lacked the wherewithal to open them. As to the purling brook, by the third day I had dwelt upon that lonely strand I hated the very sight of it, let alone the taste. The fourth night I grew fainter, and I could hear the great crabs rustling round, probably arranging who should have the best pieces.

Twice I woke myself ordering hot brandy and cornflour, and a foot-tub with boiling water and mustard in it. The fifth day I really felt extremely ill. I had, in fact, convinced myself that generations of hereditary influences had debased me to such a pitch that the life of a child of Nature was no longer possible for me. I convinced myself of this in five days. But the ship was not coming back for a month.

"On the sixth day I felt better, but faint for want of proper, or improper, nourishment. The herbs and berries and fruits fitted to this savage life only made me ill. I wanted a thousand things, chiefly clothes. On the sixth day I determined to go forth and slay a bear, and take his skin from him, that my own might be the warmer at night. If the bear slew me, I felt it was no great matter, for life, never attractive under any aspect, had now become a mere repulsive panorama of bananas, mosquitoes, and spring water. I dragged a stake from the jungle, sharpened one end by rubbing it against pieces of coral, and then set out drearily to kill anything that had fur—a bear for choice. The country literally swarmed with a small, but lively, rat. I calculated that five hundred of their skins might have made a waistcoat. But it

mattered nothing, for I could not catch them. And then history repeated itself, and, like Crusoe of old, I found a human footprint. But whereas he had trembled at the apparition of five toe-marks in the sand, I rejoiced ; more, it is a fact that I have never again felt so hilarious, not to say gregarious, as I did at that moment. A shock followed, however. I came across dead fires and bones picked clean, but evidently cooked, or possibly devilled. These savages were meat-eaters, then. My memory called to mind the bananas, and I told myself boldly that they were right. Then I found a rude pipe, broken. The thing was sufficiently savage and primitive, but had evidently contained tobacco. Again something whispered to me that they were right, though I tried to spurn the thought. And, lastly, I found a bottle—not a calabash, or gourd, or skin, or anything of that kind, but a square glass bottle ; and it smelt of brandy. Moreover, it was empty. At this discovery I broke down completely. Civilization was here before me—and after all I had suffered. Presently I should meet these bastard children of Nature, and they would see in me a lower order of animal than themselves, and possibly maltreat me. Very likely they wore

trousers and hats. In that case, instead of becoming their leader, they would employ me in a menial capacity, or regard me as a harmless curiosity, to take about like a raree show."

Here I stopped and addressed my Laugher.

"The matter of Pugsley's meeting with the Fijians must be reserved until to-morrow."

CHAPTER XXXII.

Savages—They worship the Professor—Under a misapprehension — A delicate position — Cannibals—Saved by Australian mutton—The Professor decides to take breakfast on board ship.

I LEFT Pugsley in the presence of broiled bones and an empty brandy bottle. The sting of the latter discovery may have lain in its emptiness, but he explained it differently.

The Laugher bid me proceed on the following evening, and I resumed my notes of the Professor's experiences in Fiji as follows:—

“Ten minutes after leaving the dead fire and the bottle, I heard a shout, as it were, of welcome, and looking up, beheld children of Nature to the number of about a hundred. They advanced, shaking their weapons and uttering sounds of pleasure. One misguided fool hurled a tomahawk, which missed me by the shadow of a hair's breadth. Then somebody in authority struck him down; the tribe fell back, and the chieftain approached me.

He danced round me, while I beamed upon him and made signs that I would rub noses with him. The savages were clad in skins of birds and beasts; they wore rings in their noses and ears; they were, without question, as primitive as anything one has a right to expect in a small world at the end of the nineteenth century. Everything depended on the first impression. For a moment they showed objection, and even animosity; the next I was amazed to see the chieftain throw himself at my feet, while in a moment his followers had all done the same. There I stood, serene and self-possessed, while the islanders worshipped me with the simple faith of the savage. Anon they rose and fixed their eyes upon my glasses with expressions of wonder and admiration. Then the bitter truth forced itself upon me, as one after another laid down his tomahawk and made various signs of submission. They had never seen spectacles before, and thought my eyes were those of a god. As a matter of fact, this hated relic of civilization had saved my life. I indicated by pantomime that I was hungry, and they brought me some cold fowl and other trifles, with a cup that contained a very fair approach to fermented liquor. Then we marched to the camp, and I was borne shoulder-

high on a rough but triumphal litter of boughs, plucked for the occasion. It is not too much to say that the entire tribe, from their learned men to their children and dogs, accepted me with a readiness and delight which must have gratified me exceedingly had the cause been other than it was. They possessed no place of worship where I might be fittingly installed, but set about building one immediately. Meanwhile the chieftain placed his own ample hut at my disposal, and joined me at supper himself, though I directed him by signs to stand in my presence. It was necessary for me to keep my dignity until I could learn the language and take my proper place at the head of the horde. If I had gone in for the 'man and brother' business, they would have probably resented it and destroyed me; but as the whole colony of simple-minded beings agreed to consider me their god, I pandered to them for the present. I ate, and drank, and donned skins, and sat with the wise men and learned the language of the country; but I never took off my spectacles for a moment. We got on well enough at first. The islanders were like children with a new toy, and went about giving themselves tremendous airs. The general opinion seemed to be that I was an extremely neat thing in gods—not upon the

whole showy enough, but very satisfactory in other ways. They sent a deputation one morning asking me if I should like a human sacrifice; and there was a general dissatisfaction when I answered that such an entertainment would give me no pleasure. The wise men, who began to see through me pretty quickly, explained that it would be better taste and tact to fall in with human sacrifices when the populace suggested them. ‘You see,’ declared the Prime Minister, ‘a human sacrifice means a good deal more to us than you may suppose. In the first place, such a function will do you, as the god of the island, considerable honour; and, in the second, it provides an ample store of fresh meat for the community.’

“Then the hideous truth burst upon me. These were man-eaters, frank cannibals, to whom life was a mere insipid treadmill without the delicious stimulant of human refreshment. The next deputation came with a request, which I granted, though reluctantly. It was suggested, with all deference, that I should paint my face red, white, and blue, and permit an artistic expert to tattoo sundry historical tableaux on my back. I consented, feeling that life or death hung in the balance. I saw how they had treated their former god.

True, he was a mere thing of tinsel and feathers and cocoanut fibre, but the way they pulled him to pieces, and burned him with shouts of rejoicing and laughter, convinced me the population was both fickle and cruel. In fact, the wise men told me plainly that a god never lasted the vulgar herd more than a month. But they hoped I might create a record. They knew I was a poor human worm like themselves by this time, but it suited them, for political reasons, to run me as a god, and they told me plainly that if I wanted to succeed, and keep a whole skin, I must submit at once to be tattooed.

" Next time it was suggested to me that a human sacrifice should be celebrated, I fell in with the idea gaily, and hoped it would be a big one. Those in authority cheerfully promised that I need fear no niggardly reserve in the matter, and next day there were thirty-four Fijians less than usual. Their simple custom was to eat those in straitened circumstances. If a member of the community lost his little all, he was never permitted to starve, or go into the workhouse. On the contrary, his friends gathered about the bankrupt, and rejoiced, and kindled a mighty fire, and made a great feast.

" The human sacrifice improved my position

with the common people, and when I appeared in public, painted much after the fashion of our Union Jack, and tattooed as I have described, everybody was very pleased. When I refused to join the banquet, however, there was an inclination to resent my conduct. I explained, through the wise men, that a god does not eat human flesh, and added, as an after-thought, that such behaviour would be just as monstrous, on my part, as if they ate the flesh of their god. Of course, I was a born fool to put such an idea into their heads. Nobody sticks to a notion, if he once gets it, like the simple child of Nature. He is obstinate as a mule in his opinions. Moreover, I was plump in those days, and the fish and fowls and things, though I had grown heartily tired of them, yet appeared to suit me physically.

"The fowls it was that brought up this painful subject again, when I hoped my ill-considered remark had been forgotten. The wise men showed remissness in the matter of my diet, and I used my newly acquired familiarity with the language to rate them roundly about my meals. 'You're trying to starve me,' I said; 'and if it occurs again I'll appeal to the people. Not a fish or a fowl have I eaten for a fortnight; and you

know how I like white meat.' 'Yes, your servants know,' they answered, darkly; 'they like white meat too.'

"I saw the disgraceful allusion, and was as meek as a drowned worm after that, and lay particularly low for some time. But my revenge came to me. On the next occasion of a human sacrifice, I threw myself into the scheme more enthusiastically than ever, and even indicated the nature of the repast to a certain extent. It happened that the wise man who had dropped that brutal hint about white meat was not popular at the time, and when I ventured to suggest, in a playful, ironical sort of way, that this person would look more picturesque as a pie than perhaps any individual of our little company, the idea was not only welcome, but acted upon with humorous alacrity.

"Then the other wise men grew anxious, and one terrible morning I awoke to find my spectacles gone. They had robbed me as I slept. A wise man went forth in my spectacles, and the children of Nature—save the mark!—hailed *him* as their god instantly. They built him a new temple the same afternoon. That meant that they now regarded my temple merely as a larder. The same night I was bound hand and foot, and the

leading savages assembled round me, and their new god suggested that I should be fed for a week on oysters—to develop the flavour. Nice thing for a god to suggest! This was done, and at the end of the time, that brute of a new god said he wanted a human sacrifice. Then, as an inspiration, I remembered the other relic of civilization which still lay hidden on the island. I refer to the tins of Australian mutton. They heard my statement, and some, though not many, believed. These started on an exploring expedition, and found the refreshments where I had indicated. Upon which followed one of those sudden outbursts of popular feeling so common where man is not accustomed to keep his passions under control. They brained their new god, and ate him fresh; then gave me back my spectacles, and put me once more upon the giddy pinnacle of deity. Everybody said they never had known such a god, and nobody could understand how they came to doubt me, and my miraculous accomplishments. Of course, I was not deceived. The evil day had to come. It was only a question of time. After being the public idol for a further space of eight-and-forty hours, the Australian mutton was finished, and the people wanted more. Naturally, they came to me for particulars as to

where they should find a further supply. I put them off as long as I could, and then directed them to a distant part of the island, and thought out a plan of escape. But their consideration for me was such that the idea of a canoe after dark had to be abandoned. Thirty of the warriors watched me night and day. Abdication was out of the question.

"Then one morning at sunrise the children of Nature came back weary and hungry and out of temper. They had found no more Australian meat tins, and the general inclination was to take the change out of me. My guards looked in, and told me the populace was back, and wanted me to join it at breakfast on the beach. I knew what that meant, braced myself for the last dread ordeal, and set out. A huge fire was burning by the sea, and the head butchers, two persons always up to their eyes in work at times of sacrifice, were sharpening something. The children of Nature sat round in rows. It looked like a savage school-treat. And I was the treat.

"A yell went up from their hungry throats as I appeared, and the head butchers entered upon certain hideous preliminaries with which they always introduced their art. They were dancing round me, and just about to strike the fatal blow, when a keel grated on the

beach not fifty yards off, and I found that the captain of the steamer had been as good as his word. The savages set up a cry of dismay when they saw a mariner shoot both their butchers dead. They had never heard of firearms before, and the effect upon the entire community was just what you read in books.

"The captain himself had come ashore for me, and he shook hands, and pretended not to notice the strained position, and asked me how I was getting on.

"'Just going to breakfast—eh?' he said.

"'Yes,' I answered, 'but I would as soon have it on board as ashore.'

"'Are you coming back to us, then?'" he asked, with feigned surprise.

"'Yes,' I replied, 'I design to return to civilization. You called at the right moment. This savage life is all right for a time, but it palls on you after a while. The Fijian has few faults, but, unfortunately, those are of an ineradicable nature.'

"Then we went aboard."

CHAPTER XXXIII.

My Laugher plunges into space—And describes great matters of wonder—The Intelligence speaks—And criticises mundane matters unfavourably—I refuse to hear more.

"THE man Pugsley and his views may form a fitting prelude to the subject on which I designed to address you," began the Laugher upon the following evening. "That subject, you will recollect, was to be upon the theme of 'Other Life in other Worlds.' Well, first I may tell you that it happens I possess some information in this direction denied to mankind, but there is this difficulty: when dealing with an order of beings, and a scheme of creation and existence beyond human experience, or the power of human conception, human language naturally falls short. You have certain senses, seven in number, but how is human language going to describe a living being with twenty senses? Even your own animals possess senses to

which you cannot give a name. Your ant and your fish and your bird have powers not only denied to you, but beyond your comprehension to remotely guess at or estimate. Then how shall words tide the difficulty before us? They can only do so to a certain extent. You might as well imagine that you could make a two-year-old child understand bi-metallism, as suppose that you yourself have power to grasp the theory of existence in certain worlds other and larger and infinitely more ancient than this."

"Then we had better abandon the subject," I suggested, with some approach to relief.

"No, we will attack it from a different standpoint," he replied. "It is not possible for me to explain the greatness of things that exist, and have been created by the Everlasting. There are conscious Intelligences within the universe, mightier by far than the noblest human conception of the Creator Himself; and yet they are below Him as the earthworm is below you. I will, if it please you, survey mankind from the standpoint of such an Intelligence. That done, you may judge for yourself of the gulf fixed between your planet and those elsewhere. We hear much of the suspected existence of life in our own system, and Mars is alleged

to have reached a point in its history at which high forms of life might reasonably be supported. But speculation rarely pushes beyond our system. Conceive, however, of a world plunged into the awful depths of space, so distant that only a photographic plate records the existence of its sun. On that world I will place my Intelligence. Man's ingenuity has not discovered the existence of that world; human eye will never see it in space, but on that world, under conditions obviously impossible to state, dwells an Intelligence whose age as compared with man's is infinite. This Intelligence possesses powers we cannot guess at; it also possesses powers to which our own may be said to feebly approximate in some directions. Thus, we may discover the sun of that Intelligence's world by a speck written in light on photographic negatives; but he—mark this, has perfected the thing you call science until he sees your very world a thousand times more distinctly than you can see the moon through the Great Lick telescope. The light of your sun hides you from the dweller in Neptune or Uranus; the giants of your own system know not that your world exists; but that far-off Intelligence sees you. You are in his hand. He

eyes you through the awful voids of Heaven as you eye mites on a cheese; he watches you and notes your operations as you note the works of bees in a glass hive; he speculates upon your powers, your means of communication with each other; he marvels at the height of reasoning intelligence attained by things so low in the scale of Creation and so wondrously minute."

"'Minute'! How big is your Intelligence, as you call it, then?"

"Conceive, if you can, when I tell you that your world is to his as your child's india-rubber ball is to the Sun! His world is far greater than your entire system."

"Good heavens! Is there room in the Universe for such a world as that?"

My Laugher's eyes shone, and he looked weirdly at me.

"What you can see of space is not overmuch, friend. You would laugh if a child judged the water in his little bucket to be an appreciable fraction of the sea; yet you are making the same mistake. And this world-grain 'of matter gives up its secrets to my Intelligence, and my Intelligence publishes his researches for the benefit of his peers."

Here I interrupted. "Now, you're going to tell me what he said, and how he sneered at

the world and all that is in it. I won't hear you. Besides, it's been done before. Voltaire did it. He brought a man down from Mars, or somewhere."

"Yes, a *man*," answered the Bronze, with contempt in his voice. "Listen, and vex me no more. It matters not, how these living things convey their thoughts. For the purpose of your comprehension we will suppose a process akin to print on paper is adopted. Let us also assume the human machinery of a learned association met in congress. That will be simple."

"Then your Intelligence reads a paper, and all the other Intelligences pat him on the back—that is, if he has a back."

"So be it," answered the Laugher. "We will indulge in human anthropomorphism, and credit him with two arms, two legs, two eyes, a mouth, and the like."

"And a nose, with a pair of spectacles on it, if you don't mind."

"Granted out of respect to human limitations. This being, then, makes known the things he has discovered. Needless to say, he uses no human names for what he has seen; and needless to say, the vehicle in which he conveys his investigations is as far removed from human language and methods of human

thought as can be. But that you shall be able to understand, I will burlesque his utterance into mere modern English, and convey by that petty medium such of the Intelligence's assertions as you, and those like you, can understand."

He was silent a moment, and I drank some spirit and water to brace me for the ordeal. Then the Laugher began, pretending to be that remote and awful Intelligence, addressing others like itself. He aped the method and manner of a mere human philosopher or scientist giving a lecture; and he spoke thus—

"Gentlemen, pursuing my studies amidst the more distant systems which fly isolated in the infinite depths of space, I have, since I last enjoyed the honour to address you, some five thousand years ago, discovered new forms of life upon no less than twenty-three planets not previously proved to possess it. (Applause). In most cases, life upon these spheres has reached a point of fair advancement, and taken upon itself some few million forms. Of these I shall only trouble you this evening with the most developed in each case. Conscious intelligence has been reached in all the planets which I have investigated, and in some cases to a remarkable degree. These I

shall discuss at greater length immediately ; but before doing so, I may dismiss the less interesting and more primitive existences. To take the least first, I have noted a minute planet in a minute system, distant from our own some hundred quadrillions of miles. Micro-telescopes, the most recent scientific improvements of our optical apparatus, have, so to speak, placed this tiny world in my grasp, and I may, perhaps, be allowed to detain you a year or two with an account of it, before proceeding to more important branches of my subject."

At this point I interrupted. "A year or two ? "

"Precisely ! Human measurements and calculations are of necessity employed by me —else you would miss the significance of what you hear. If for 'two years' I had substituted 'two minutes,' which is about the duration of time on a human calculation, represented by two years to my Intelligence, you would have missed the force of the point."

Then he continued, "This small planet is thickly covered by a little anthropoid of boundless activity and energy. It stands upright, moves along the ground, and has so far probed the outer rind of Nature's laws as to discover one or two of her more

elementary secrets, and employ them to its own purposes. This gregarious blight swarms in certain centres, living by the pursuit of varied avocations. Some of it vends produce for metal, by which all live ; some of it fights ; some enjoys titular distinction, handed down from father to son ; some exist by conducting the different schemes of worship ! Considering the ephemeral nature of their lives, these creatures display a physical pluck and energy almost impressive to witness. If one of them lives two of our hours it is matter for wonder. And yet they have altered the face of the planet they inhabit in some particulars, if one examines it closely. They throw up centres of activity ; build dwelling-places for themselves, and houses for their gods ! They show a curious hatred to the lesser animals, from which they have sprung. Many they hunt to death and destroy altogether, others—which is still more horrible—they breed and eat. Thousands live by the breeding of beasts, quite close akin to themselves in the animal world, though, doubtless, from the standpoint of their own knowledge, they believe there is no connecting link. They also devour one another at times. They breed freely ; but years of a barbaric artificiality have interfered with the processes of

Nature in many ways. Their bodies are covered with shreds and patches of stuffs, chiefly cut from woolly beasts. The most advanced hide themselves up, except as to the head and foremost extremities. Their senses seem very limited and defective; but to atone for this—as is the case with many of the lower orders of life where brain is small—their physical strength is remarkable. They spend a good deal of time fighting, and show remarkable ferocity and ingenuity in their warlike operations. The more advanced have no pity for the weaker and ruder nations. The black anthropoids, which live in equatorial and other regions of the planet, are being slaughtered off at a great pace by the white races. The fittest survive; that primitive law of Nature holding throughout the whole planet. Their religion, as practised by the most intelligent—if that word may be used in connection with an order of beings so humble—is in many respects too horrible to contemplate. The grotesque impiety of it reaches a stage which alone serves to make these creatures most remarkable. They admit the existence of the Everlasting, but they have the inconceivable audacity to assert that they are made *in His own*—”

“That will do,” I said; “I know what you

are going to say next, and next, and next. I can't hear you. If your object was to make me feel a shade smaller than usual, you have achieved it. For the rest we will take the investigations of your Intelligence as spoken."

"Alas! you, too, are afraid of shocking your fellow anthropoids," said the Laugher. Then he added, with a changed voice, "After all, perhaps, I had better tell you that my story is a myth. You see that Intelligence, removed so far from you, cannot know of the existence of the world, because the light first kindled at its creation has not yet reached him."

"A very good thing, too," said I.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

Last words from my Laugher—Tolerance—Faith and Reason—A simile—The Garden of God—A world-flower—“Fare thee well.”

“To-NIGHT,” I began, but my bronze interrupted.

“To-night,” he said, with a strange mystery hidden in his silver voice—“To-night, child of man, you shall give heed to me. Know, first, that this is the fiftieth evening we have had speech together—the fiftieth, and the last. Before I speak again, you and yours, and your children, and your children’s children, and the work of your hands and brains, and perchance the pomp of your nation will all be dust; for, ere then, the world shall roll through five hundred more years. Who knows, indeed, that my own battered bronze carcase will hold together so long?”

“This is a blow to me,” said I; “and it shows the folly of not keeping careful diaries

of the great concerns of life. I had thought that many days of intercourse still extended before us. But speak as you will, and let me listen. If you have a mind to sum up now the opinions this brief glimpse of human life has brought to you, I pray you speak.

" So be it then. For myself, know this ; I take my leave willingly enough, for to me this age is painful above all other ages my eyes have opened upon. To-day landmarks are vanishing with mournful rapidity ; certainties grow fewer ; theories flood the world in a deluge worse than Deucalion's. Knowledge cows all mankind. It is a lighthouse—a star-glimmer serving to show the awful darkness of the delta that tends towards Truth. I use the word 'delta' of set purpose. There is no straight road or river leading to truth, but a delta of a thousand arteries. Science plods here, Religion there ; and all the arteries are very meet to be explored ; all command exploration ; all are full fraught with danger of whirlpool and rock on the wave, blind alley, precipice, and morass upon the shore. And they flow and wind onwards, tending through the same undiscovered country to the same infinite sea. I mark progress from my standpoint in time ; I note the nations of humanity jostling forward, or

standing still, or turning back. To-day Greece is in the fore-front ; to-morrow Rome ; the next day both are dead, and infant nations scramble forward over their corpses.

“ Tolerance is the key-note of modern Philosophy—not the tolerance which is another name for laziness, and shall be found boasted by the man of mean intellect ; but the Tolerance which is wisdom, and has clear eyes, and is not deceived. It allows a fair measure of good to all human achievements ; it deems every religion and ethical ambition worthy of praise ; it asserts not, nor denies ; it paints the world grey. Neither spotless white, mark you, nor devilish black, but grey. The primary colours, if rightly mingled in their purity, are colourless ; but man’s best endeavours to reach that perfection of blending produce only an approximation of purity—he attains to grey. Viewing life likewise, he sees not the perfect significance of it as the thing may reflect itself on a God’s eye, but finds it obscured as with clouds. Evil and Good are human words to describe different conditions. They may be remote as light from darkness ; but it needed the Everlasting to separate Light from Darkness—no man can so deal with Chaos. To-day we find the emotions and instincts of mankind mighty complex,

and the most learned only know how to analyze a little of the mass. Religious chemists, indeed, discriminate fearlessly, and separate Light from Darkness with a line ; but the tolerant find no such clean division. The boundaries, firmly marked from one stand-point, vanish when seen from another.

“Pursue now the figure of a delta of many branches tending to Truth, and note the place of Faith upon it, and the position occupied by Reason. God alone knows which is nearest its journey’s end; God alone can surely say whether Faith’s golden galley is vital to the ultimate prosperity of humanity, and will weather the whirlpools ahead of it; and God alone is aware if Reason’s uncomely craft shall find a haven. But the ‘Father of Gifts’ sent both the one and the other. View both with ample tolerance, therefore. Cling to that which you possess, but flout not that other which you lack. And learn this—no living man can sail in both those vessels. To do so is to live half a lie. Seek Truth, therefore, where your genius points and your heart tells you it may be found. Take ship boldly; be a willing sailor on one craft; and see on the other vessel no rivals, but fellow-men, fighting like yourself for Truth with the best weapons they possess. Faith’s argosy spreads silken sails for the Land of

Promise, music resounds on her fair decks, and her progress is glorious to behold. Reason's unlovely craft—a very mud-arge—shows no bravery of jewel or gem, no pomp or music. She grubs her sure way. She rides beautifully over no rocky channel, shoots courageously no foaming rapid, but advances by inches dredging the stream of knowledge till there is water enough for her to float in ; daring little, risking nothing, exploring, probing, doubting. So, by ways remote, mankind perhaps advances to the same end, and the travellers themselves can no more estimate the result of their labours than ants can calculate the circumference of an ant-hill or coral insects triumph at a coral island. The End—the ultimate Achievement—must be gauged by a God ; the last chapter and summing up of your world's history must be written by the Everlasting when it is gathered to the stars that are dead.

" And take this final simile from me. I have laughed enough at man, but now, with the silence and oblivion of five hundred years stretching before me, I will laugh no more. This simile shall appeal to all, as I think—to those who seek the Maker under microscopes, and to those who find Him in Space ; to those who see Him revealed by inspired penmen, to those who cry that Nature only knows Him.

"Look you out of your casement on such a night as the sky stretches unclouded to the horizon. Gaze forth and behold the garden of God. He walks through the awful vistas of the Universe, and His eye dwells on the golden petals of the suns which He has made. Each twinkling bower of worlds is known to Him. His word has painted this sphere with crimson, that with sapphire, and that with infinite purity and infinite brightness. His hand also has gathered the dead stars which once lived and adorned the garden, but now are not ; He knows the worlds that are dying, and those but now coiling into life ; He tends the hoary blossoms and the young buds also ; at His will new worlds raise their bright heads and suns wither into darkness. There are no weeds in that garden, for the least of the myriad lesser lights is fair and God-created for a cause. Wide Heaven is fringed with the gleaming splendour of God's flower-worlds, and they, when the Master has brought them to the fulness of their glory, are the fair homes of all living things. As the least and lowliest flower of the field brings joy to unknown lives, so the least and lowliest of the flowers in the Garden of God hangs bright amid the mighty for His vast purposes, and has not blossomed in vain. The violet is no less fair because her place is at the foot of the rose.

"God has planted a world-flower here in this little corner of His garden, where a sun is monarch. And the world-flower has budded and bloomed, and the seed of life within it has budded and bloomed likewise through a span of ages—ages as vast in man's computation as the duration of the lily to the generations of small things which live and die thereon.

"The Great Gardener forgets no flower. He waits for the seed-time and the harvest of each, for He knows the seasons of them all, and the fruits of them; the days of their planting are with Him, and the days of their death are His secret. Bring home that thought when you scan the sky; dwell upon it and make it great for yourself by the infinite elaboration which it will bear. And so, farewell."

THE END.

February, 1896.

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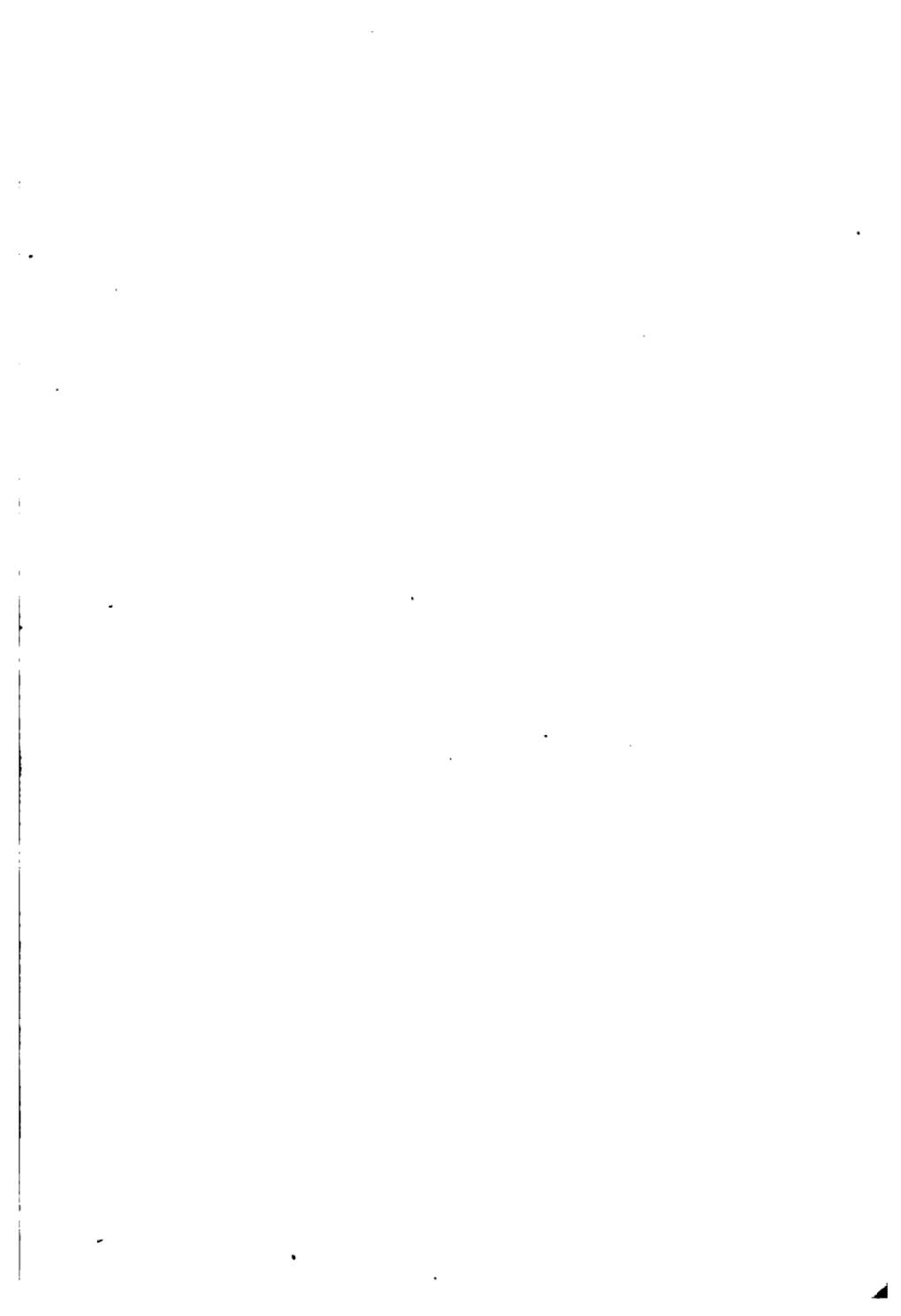
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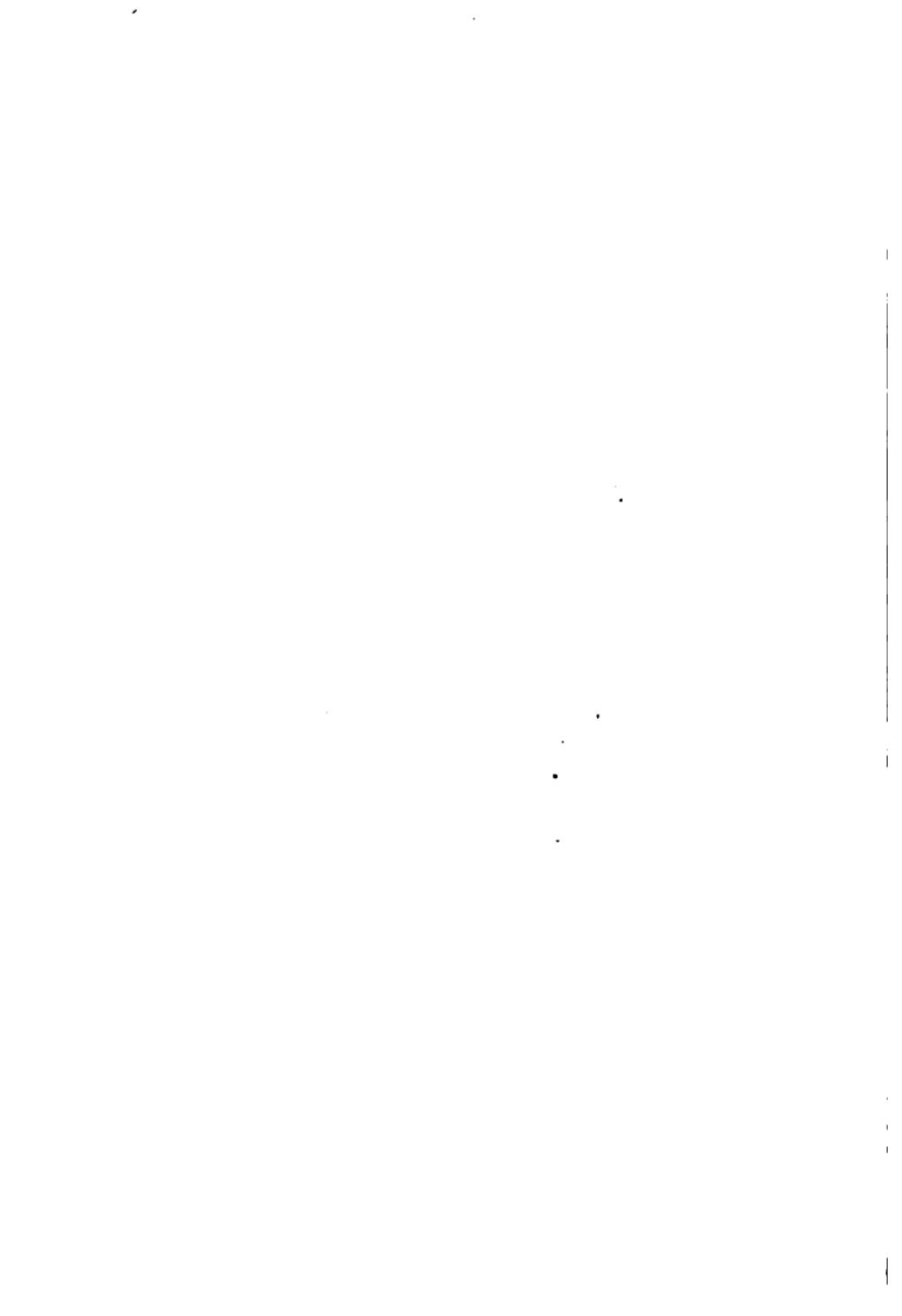
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